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Hypocrisy and Authenticity

Simply Jesus Series

Matthew 23:1-39

Pastor Mark Kremer

Four years ago our daughter, Gracia, suddenly came down with an intense pain in her foot, the outside of her foot and around her ankle. It was really bothering her and she just took some pain medication. There was no visible sign of a wound or injury. She couldn't remember hurting it anywhere and it just continued to get worse and worse. Finally she went to an orthopedic doctor and he diagnosed her with a torn tendon or something in her foot and to just ice it. And she continued to deal with the pain. So she did that and it just continued to get worse. The pain got more and more intense. She made calls back to the office, but the doctor was on vacation. The office said just hang in there and come back on Monday. It just continued to get worse and finally she went to the emergency room. And that emergency room doctor diagnosed it as something completely different and said, "Well, there's still nothing we can really do about it and so just ice your leg and take some pain medication and stay home." It just continued to swell and get hot, and finally there were streaks going up her leg. I remember her calling on a Friday night to us and just crying in such intense agony and pain. And now she had a low grade fever and we said, "Honey you're going to have to go back to the hospital again." And she's kind of embarrassed to go back again. And the next morning, about 6:00 in the morning we get a call from her roommate who is crying and said, "We're at the hospital, they had to do emergency surgery. She's got a raging infection that just about to kill her." Literally her body had gone into septic shock and in a very short period of time this undetected, sort of misdiagnosed mass infection, this bacterial infection, these powerful bugs had literally taken over her body. And she had three or four emergency surgeries, 18 days in the hospital, intense, intense antibiotics. And it was more than a year really of recovery for her from this very, very intense infection. This very small thing that just about took her life.

Now is there is a spiritual equivalent to that kind of infection? You know Jesus was known as the great physician. The obviously sick and broken came to him ready to be healed both physically and spiritually. Those everybody knew were sick, they came to Jesus to be healed. But there was a sickness, an infection that was so insidious, so deadly but it was unrecognized. It was masked, it was masked in religion. And it was hidden so deeply that Jesus had to go out and warn people against it and then to go to those directly infected and speak very boldly and very plainly, "You have a deadly, deadly infection. And if you don't do something about it, it's going to wipe you out."

Luke 12, Verse 1 says:

> **"Jesus said to the disciples in the crowd that were with Him, 'beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy'."** **(*NASB, Luke 12:1)**

Leaven of course is yeast and the scriptures use it both positively and negatively. But it's always used in conjunction with this idea that a little tiny bit affects the whole lump of dough. Just a tiny little bit affects and totally changes the thing that it enters into. In this particular case, Jesus is saying that the leaven is really an infection. It's a tiny infection that makes it way

in. It's a tiny infection of the Pharisees, and literally a little bit of leaven leavens the whole lump. It can destroy the entire thing. And what is that infection? He said it was hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is a word that means to "play a role; to be an actor; to pretend to be something that you're not." It can take a couple of different forms. It can be saying one thing and doing something quite differently. That's what we think of as a hypocrite. It also can entail doing all the right things externally but for all the very wrong reasons, from a completely jaded and evil heart.

Now Jesus went after this infection straight on. And we find that in our text today, Matthew Chapter 23. This entire chapter Jesus goes after this idea of hypocrisy, this infection that is particularly found among religious people. Now we're here this morning, and most of us would say, you know we're not religious. We're followers of Jesus. But the reality is we would all say we are spiritual people. We understand there is a spiritual dimension to life. So I think this is just as insidious of an infection that can infect us as it can anyone else. Now last week we found ourselves wanting to shake our heads at the disciples who just couldn't really seem to grab a hold of the mission that Jesus was on. They couldn't let go of their glory and greatness to embrace the road of suffering at the cross. And we had to shake our head about how spiritually dense they were. Until the end we sort of said, "You know what? We're just as spiritually dense. How many times do we have to hear God say something to us before we finally get it?"

Now today our challenge is going to be as we go through and Jesus points out both the dangers of hypocrisy and then the symptoms, our tendency is going to be, our temptation is going to be, is to immediately have someone else come to mind and want to point the finger. So today's the day the temptation is going to be to point the finger. And I'm just going to say that we need to first of all and primarily look within. I think it's particularly challenging for me. Because any illustration that I use of hypocrisy this morning of anyone else may in and of itself be hypocrisy. So I'm going to share both illustrations that are outside of myself and some that I know and recognize within myself.

Chapter 23, Verse 1. This text is really broken into two sections. We're really going to look into verses 1 through 12 where Jesus just talks about and identifies the problem of hypocrisy.

> **Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in synagogues. And the respectful greetings in the marketplaces and being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father for One is your Father, He who is in heaven, and do not be called Leaders for One is your Leader, and that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted'." (Matthew 23: 1-12)**

Jesus addresses particularly here the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes were the experts in the Old Testament walk. They knew it inside and out. The Pharisees were the theological leaders of the nation. And we have to sort of step into this context I think to really grab a hold of it because this was not a pluralistic society like ours, lots of religions, lots of competing ideas. Religion was the center of the nation and it was the worship of Yahweh that was at the center of that. And the scribes and the Pharisees were the elite, the powerful. They were the ones who set the tone for the entire nation. Jesus says that the scribes and the Pharisees had set themselves in the seat of Moses. In other words they had desired to be the spiritual leaders of the country. They had put themselves forward as the ones to be looked up to, the ones to be followed, the ones who had something important to say. Jesus says they were speaking truth to some degree. They would teach the law but what they taught, even when they taught it rightly, they didn't practice it.

I think the first warning here is that we are not to follow those who don't live what they preach, who don't live out what they teach. Don't follow people like that. No matter how much truth they may proclaim, if they don't live it out in their life, don't follow them, Jesus said. Now that's particularly important I think in our particular culture and generation because there are all kinds of preachers and teachers on television and people that write books. And it all sounds really, really good. But we don't know them. And it's easy to become enamored with people; it's easy to become enamored with teachers and so forth. But unless we really know that they are living it out, then we shouldn't be following them. It's very dangerous. We're complicit in creating a hypocritical environment if we follow people but we don't know how they really live it out. He says that these hypocrites also tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders. They promote a legalistic performance based living. The Pharisees had no end to the rules that they would give to people. All kinds of ceremonial things, day in and day out. You had to wash your hands, you had to do this, you had to do that and it was so burdensome to people. But when people were being crushed underneath the load of all of those rules and regulations, were the Pharisees there to help to lend a hand? No way, you're on your own.

"Don't follow people," Jesus says, "who want to lay all kind of heavy stuff on you and say you ought to go and do this, and go and do that but aren't willing to get in the trenches alongside and help along the way." We might say people who have to formulate Christianity, you know ten steps to this, six steps to that, that there's some kind of formula and people love to sort of receive that. And you try to live out the formula. But it doesn't work. God didn't offer us a formula of faith. He offered us a relationship. Don't follow people who have formulas, who lay rules on you, but aren't willing to be involved.

Then He says in Verses 5-7 that these people love to seek attention. They love to be the center of attention. They love everything to just sort of revolve around them. They like the seats of honor. They had these phylacteries, these boxes that they wore on their forehead and their arm that contained the scrolls of the scriptures and they made quite a show of it. I mean they loved to be the center of attention. Jesus said, "Don't follow people who want to be the center of attention. Don't look up to people who want all the attention drawn to them." And believe me religion is a great place for people to make a name for themselves, to build a kingdom for themselves, it happens all the time.

Years ago I worked for a family that owned a number of businesses but one of them that I ran was a Christian publishing company and a Christian newspaper and this was their sort of ticket to being somebody in the Christian community in the state where we lived. Their other

businesses were horribly run, unethically run. But this one because they had this thing, they were somebody in the Christian community. Everybody looked up to them, loved to have them around, and they just loved to parade around as the people who ran their own Christian newspaper. But they had no resemblance to Jesus. They just wanted to be the center of attention. Jesus said, "Don't follow people like that." Then He says, "Don't follow people who put themselves above others, want the places of authority, like the places and titles. These people wanted to be called "teacher". They wanted to be called "father", they wanted to be called "leader". And Jesus says, "There's only One Leader, there's only One Teacher, there's only One Father." And interestingly enough the Teacher is the Holy Spirit, the Father is God Himself, and Jesus said "I'm the Leader." So it's the Trinity. Follow the Trinity. Don't follow men. I think that's really what Jesus is saying. Don't be enamored with men. Don't put men or women on a pedestal. Don't try to find someone to look up to to follow because what you are doing when you do that is you are helping to create an environment where hypocrisy flourishes.

Hypocrisy flourishes in an environment where men are elevated and all of the sudden we're putting expectations on people to the point where they can no longer actually admit when there's a problem. You see men are just frail. I love what Jesus said, "All men were brothers." We're brothers, that's what we are. So we shouldn't be elevating one another, we should be standing beside one another. We're just walking this journey together. Don't put someone in a place, on a pedestal. It's a great opportunity for disaster. That's the environment where this infection just grows and flourishes. In reality we just all need to be following Jesus. Just following Jesus. He's front and center.

Now He spoke to the crowds and to the disciples and identified and warned them about this insidious infection. Now he speaks directly to the Pharisees. I love this about Jesus. He didn't talk behind people's backs, send an email or a letter or a phone call. No, He sat face to face, looked them in the eye, and He said, "You're a hypocrite." Here's the disease. He's giving them the opportunity to see it and to deal with it before it kills them. Each one of these seven symptoms in this next section began with this word "Woe." Now we don't go around saying, "Woe to you, woe to you." But we might say it this way because it's a combination of both sadness and anger. We might *say how sad and shameful* that this is what you are doing. He speaks right to them.

Verse 13:

> **"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, pretenders, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."** **(Matthew 23: 13)**

Now immediately you realize that the Pharisees were opposing Jesus at every turn. They were not accepting Him as Messiah, they were not believing in Him, and they were preventing other people from believing in Him. Their constant questioning, their constant challenging, their opposition to Jesus kept many spiritually hungry from coming to Jesus to be healed to find life. We can immediately think in our own culture and context of churches where they may have the name Christian on the title of the church, on the name of the church but they don't believe in the deity of Jesus, they don't believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. They don't teach people that. And so spiritually hungry people who go to those churches, wanting to know God end up finding nothing. Self-righteousness. Do better. Try harder. But it all looks so

good. And really what He's saying is you slam the door to the kingdom in people's faces, instead of being a door opener, saying "Come in, let me show you Jesus."

Now I know that probably none of us here would throw up theological doors in front of people to come to Jesus. But is it possible that we are hypocritical in that we often have by our actions created road blocks for people to enter the kingdom? My friend Matt Woodley is a pastor and writer, writes for "Christianity Today" and he wrote this:

> "My friend Walter calls me his favorite Christian. I call him my favorite atheist. Walter is dumbfounded by the level of hypocrisy found among religious people. During a casual conversation I asked him how he converted to atheism. His answer surprised me. He said, 'I was 16 years old waiting to enter a worship service. My whole family attended worship service every Sunday at a downtown church in Atlanta. One day as I was sitting on the steps watching people stream in, a black family approached the church's front door. Before they could get in, a couple of ushers intercepted them and said to them, "Excuse me this is a white's only church. There's a church for colored people down the road." Surprised and humiliated, the family slipped back down the steps and onto the street. This was before the Civil Rights movement. But that scene revolted and enraged me. On that Sunday morning, sitting on those beautiful church steps, my faith shattered. Later on while attending college I discovered the philosophical framework for my atheism but that was my initial conversion.'"

And I wonder if we get real honest with ourselves, what actions, what practices, in your life and my life, end up being doors to people entering the kingdom? Sobering. Everything we do, every day makes a difference. It needs to be lived in light of the truth we claim. Because it's either going to open the door for people to want to know the Jesus we proclaim or it's going to shut the door in their face.

We move to Verse 15. Verse 14 may be in brackets in your Bible because the earliest and best manuscripts actually don't have Verse 14 in them. It seems to have been added later. So we're going to pass right on by that one. Verse 15:

> **"How sad and shameful you scribes and Pharisees, pretenders, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." (Matthew 23:15)**

The Pharisees were great at going out and trying to find proselytizers, but they weren't making disciples for Yahweh, they were making disciples for themselves. They were building their own kingdom, not the kingdom of God. And when they tried to make disciples and fashion them just like themselves, those disciples end up being even worse than the Pharisees themselves. Do we experience that? I was involved in a church for a while. There was a group of people in that church that followed a particular preacher teacher. And they were so rigidly following him and what he said and everything he did and they just literally came to church to try to you know catch people saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. I mean they were way worse than the guy they were following. They were ten times as disruptive as the pastor that they followed. Are we building our own kingdom, or are we building His kingdom? The church, religion is a great place to build your own kingdom, make a name for yourself, be somebody, have a following. It's hypocrisy. Kingdom of God should be front and

center. Verses 16 through 22, the next woe:

> **"How sad and shameful you blind guides who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated. You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.** **(Matthew 23: 16-22)**

Now that's kind of a long, lengthy thing. And it's actually kind of humorous. Because what he's talking about here is that the Pharisees love to split theological hairs. They love to catch people on technicalities. And they would use the technicalities, they would use the fine points of oaths and swearing to track people and what they had promised to do and excuse themselves from their own commitments that they had made. And so Jesus is saying this is nauseating when people do that. Have you ever been around people like that who are listening and you just get the sense they are just trying to catch you saying the wrong thing and then they can kind of jump on you right away? You been around people like that? I just want to run; I want to get sick and throw up and run away. I don't be around, it's just nauseating. And I think Jesus is just kind of giving them this long thing to say this is nauseating isn't it? Technicalities. Theological hair-splitting.

Our son Lee, who is now 11, when he was 4, he was in the back seat of the car and we were driving somewhere. And I said something about what we had just done the day before. Something like that. And he speaks up from the back seat at age 4, and he said, "Well technically Dad, that's not quite right." And I said, "Technically, Lee? Technically?" He goes "Dad, I'm a technical man. That's just the kind of guy I am." That's the Pharisees. Splitting theological hairs to excuse themselves from their obligations while trapping people. Making them hold up every last little jot and tittle of what they had committed to do. It's hypocrisy.

Verse 23:

> **"How sad and shameful you scribes and Pharisees. Pretenders. For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law; justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things that you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"** **(Matthew 23:23-24)**

Here again is almost a humorous picture. They were so particular about getting their tithe right that they would take the herbs out of the garden. Could you imagine you harvested 15 stems of dill and so God got a tenth. So you would put all of your 15 stems of dill out and well there's 15 and so God gets one and a half. And they would just absolutely, meticulously follow that. And Jesus said, "But you're doing that meticulously but the thing, the important things, justice, mercy, faithfulness, you are neglecting." Here what He's talking about is majoring on the minors. The Pharisees loved to major on the minors, nitpick the little things and miss the big picture, the important things. And here like many of us this morning, I find myself guilty.

Particularly I think with my children, because I want so badly for them to walk with God, to know God. And I think I know the kinds of things externally that are the evidence of that and so I pick at them. I have a tendency to do that. They will be here next hour and I'm sure they'll be shaking their heads. There may be applause. It's completely wrong on my part. I need to major on the majors. I need to be concerned about the heart. I need to know and be passionate about the things that are on God's heart. Not nitpick at all the little things. That's hypocrisy.

Verse 25:

> **"How sad and shameful you scribes and Pharisees and hypocrites. For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish but inside, they are full of robbery and self indulgence. You blind Pharisees. First clean the inside of the cup and of the dish so the outside may become clean also.** **(Matthew 23:25)**

What did the Pharisees do? They focused on the externals rather than on the heart. For them it was all about the outward behaviors. It was all about the show. It was all about doing the right things but never talking about the motive, the heart behind it. Very concerned about making sure everything looked good on the outside. But inside He said you are full of robbery, you are full of disease. This infection is growing in you and you are not concerned about that. You are just all concerned about the outside. Again I have to tell you religion and the church is primed for this. Looking good, making sure we do the right things outside. Thinking that someone is really spiritual because they serve or they do this or they do that without really being thoughtful about the hearts. Promoting the heart. Where is your heart? Do you really love God? Do you really love others? All about the externals.

I'm reminded of the story of the little boy whose father told him to sit down about 50 times at the dinner table. And he kept standing up and he'd tell him to sit down. Finally the little boy sat down and he said, "Well I'm sitting down on the outside but I'm standing up on the inside." Aren't we like that? A lot of time going through the motions doing the right thing externally but with a heart far from God. Jesus said that's hypocrisy. How sad and shameful.

Verse 27:

> "**Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, pretenders. For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."** **(Matthew 23:27-28)**

Very similar to the previous one but just a little bit different. And that is what the Pharisees did is that they worked very hard to cover up their sin. They worked very hard to cover up and hide their sinfulness.

We can think of all kinds of examples. I can think of examples from my own life. We can think of examples of things that have been going on in our culture. Think about Penn State. Think about the desire and need to protect an image, to protect something that people thought was good. But the very covering up to protect this image only revealed that what was the image was not real. It was an illusion. The same thing has been playing out in Omaha with the public school superintendent these past few weeks. Example after example of covering up, of

hiding because we fear men, we want to look good, we want to be respected so we hide, we cover. And the church is a great place to hide and cover our sin. Religious people are most prone to this. Rather than honesty, humility and confession, we want to whitewash it. But Jesus sees right through the heart of the matter.

Verse 29, the last woe:

> **"Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you build the tombs of the prophets, adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'if we'd been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore behold I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes, and some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in the synagogues and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on the earth from the blood of righteous Able to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation."**
> **(Matthew 23: 29-36)**

The Pharisees gave lip service to being the kingdom of God. They decorated the graves of the prophets, they claimed that they were a part of the kingdom and they certainly would have been right alongside the prophets of old. But at the very same time they are giving lip service to God's servants in the past. They are seeking to undermine and destroy the servant of God who's among them. They were trying to wipe Jesus out. It's hypocrisy, pretending to be on God's team while the very things you are doing are undercutting the work of God.

Jesus has tremendous compassion as the Great Physician. He's coming with a strong warning, you have a serious infection. It's going to wipe you out. It's going to destroy you if you don't repent of this. And I have come. And prophets have come. And I'm going to send more. I'm going to send the apostles after I ascend. And I'm going to plead with you and beg with you to acknowledge and come to me for the cure. But you're going to end up killing me, and killing the prophets. And so this infection is going to destroy you.

Just 40 years later, the invading armies came to Jerusalem and killed every man, woman and child. The historian Josephus claimed 1.1 million people were wiped out. And when they got done killing every single human being, they turned their attention to the city and they took down that entire city. They destroyed the temple until not one stone was standing upon another. Every building, every wall except for a few towers was leveled in that city. Josephus said the city was so destroyed that people who had been there and visited in the past would come to the spot and would have to inquire, "Where's Jerusalem"? Every tree, every garden was destroyed, cut down, it was a wasteland. It was a picture Jesus had predicted that if you don't repent of this hypocrisy it's going to kill you. It's going to destroy the nation. And we are reminded that if hypocrisy is allowed and grow in our lives, it will destroy us. It will destroy your family; it will destroy your legacy. It destroys churches. It destroys movements of God. Hypocrisy is a huge, huge problem. It's an insidious infection. It's a killer. Jesus offers himself as the cure. It is in humility and brokenness of coming to Jesus and asking for forgiveness and asking Him to shine the light, His penetrating, Great Physician light into the

deepest recesses of our heart to expose all of the rottenness that is there. And then confessing it to Him, that allows us to walk free of it.

Our prayer though this morning cannot be "God, keep me from hypocrisy". We have to say this morning we are all hypocrites at one level or another. We are inconsistent and we are self-deceived in some way. We are still in the flesh. So the question is not "God keep me, you know how can I stay away from hypocrisy?" We're being a hypocrite in even saying that. John said, "If we say we have no sin, we lie." The question is, will I get gut level honest, see the hypocrisy in my own life, and repent of it? See the compassion of Jesus, Verse 37:

> **"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her, how often I have wanted to gather your children together the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you were unwilling. Behold your house is being left to you desolate. For I say to you now on you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."** **(Matthew 23:37)**

In other words Jesus is saying, "I'm coming this one last time. This is the last opportunity. And you won't have another opportunity to deal with this hypocrisy if you reject me in power and glory." And it will be too late. But you see this maternal instinct in God who wants to gather the children and protect them and bring them close. Jesus weeps, He longs, He wants us to rid ourselves of this hypocrisy and come near. It requires us to get gut level honest with ourselves. Where is that hypocrisy in my life? Where am I a pretender? Where is my self-deceit? Where is my inconsistency?

Mike is going to come and lead us in a song. We're going to have a couple of minutes of just reflection as he plays. And I would invite you this morning to just honestly open your heart up in these areas and ask God to show you where there is infection in your life. Infection and hypocrisy, and then bring it to Jesus this morning and ask Him to cure you because of the cross, because of His payment of sin on our behalf, because He loves us, because He longs for us to be close. If we confess our sins He will cleanse us of them. But we are going to have to continue to walk broken and humbled before Him. Day after day after day because this insidious infection can spring up and wipe us out if we're not careful.

> *Lord, I pray that You just deal with us in Your own gentle way but clearly and straightforward with us this morning. Show us where these things are in our hearts and change us, we pray. Amen.*

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