

Hypocrisy

A Bible Study on Hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount

Reflections Grace, Sin and Transformation 8 February 2024

Matthew 5:20-22

Matthew 5:31-34

Matthew 6:1-2

Matthew 7:3-5

Hypocrisy is the act of pretending to be something one is not, or of professing to believe something one does not truly believe. It can also refer to advocating behaviour that one does not practise oneself. Jesus was deeply concerned about the hypocritical attitude of the religious leaders of His time. He was critical of such behaviour, and spoke up about it explicitly.

Are you tired of hypocritical religious leaders? Are you tired of people who do not practise what they preach? As you read this, know that you are not alone — Jesus, too, was wearied by that same attitude. In the fuller reaches of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders of His day. Jesus taught against hypocrisy on a great many issues; it would be worth taking a brief look at the matters that troubled Him.

We read in Matthew 5:20, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." He set the benchmark for us there: the degree of righteousness practised by the religious leaders. We must rise above that.

Then, in Matthew 5:21-22, we read: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." Anger against someone without just cause is a common malady we see in such people. They are usually cowardly in their approach; rather than settle matters as Jesus advised, they spread malice against people they imagine to be a threat to them. "I will oppose him, I will debase him, I will put him down" are among the utterances they make. Again, we read: "Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne" (Matthew 5:33-34).

"It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit

adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32). In our own time, this happens not only in the lives of the laity, but in the lives of religious leaders too. They become hypocritical when they preach on this very subject, and caution others to follow a principle they do not themselves keep.

A hypocritical behaviour often seen is that mentioned in Matthew 7:3-5: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

We hear religious leaders bragging about their good works. Very often, these are trivial, or are works that others have done; snatching the credit for what others have accomplished is a sign that they do not truly obey God. We read in Matthew 6:1-2: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward."