

Heaven's Secrets: Humility

Let's start with a poll. Not a political poll! No, a much more meaningful one:
Raise your hand if you want to live with Jesus in the Kingdom of Heaven?



Now, while we cannot see you through your computer, I am almost certain that 100% of our viewers did or wanted to raise their hands. (Of course, those holding a coffee cup in one hand and your mudpie in the other maybe just thought about raising your hand.)

Yes, on this we can agree, we all want to live with Jesus in the kingdom of heaven. Here's the harder question: Who is willing to rid themselves of the traits which Jesus finds repulsive, and replace them with the characteristic which will exalt us? Jesus teaches us rid our lives of vanity, arrogance and hypocrisy, instead being transformed into humble servants whom God promises to exalt into God's kingdom.

This teaching is one of the most strongly worded lessons Jesus teaches. And who is it about? The religious leaders, the equivalent of what we today call priests and ministers and pastors, but also about all of us.

What upset Jesus so much? Look at Matthew 23:3. They don't practice what they preach. This is a great warning, first of all, for people like me. I take

very seriously that I had better be willing to work on whatever I am suggesting you work on in your life because Jesus despises, even condemns hypocrites, especially those who seek to be preachers and teachers of his Word.

How do ministers get themselves into a fix like this? Well, they think they are better than the people they teach. What was happening is that the Jewish teachers were *acting* out their faith, as if they were in the theatre, rather than *living* their faith.

Now, please know that this is not a sermon against actors. God forbid, this actor prays. But the words Jesus uses compares the leaders to those who hide behind masks, like the Greek theatre masks you see here. Theatre masks were worn by actors to convey to the audience the kind of character they were portraying. The word 'hypocrite' comes from this style of acting, wearing a mask to put one face to the public while behind the mask you are a different person.

I won't put this question in the form of a poll, but how many wear masks every day, not just on Halloween? How many of us pretend to be one kind of Christian to our family and friends, but behind the mask we are wearing we are someone else who doesn't really want to live like that.

Jesus urges you today, just take off the mask, friend. Be real. Allow the Spirit to transform you. Go ahead and save the mask for Broadway (or Halloween), but don't hide behind a mask in real life.



Nathaniel Hawthorne observed that, "No man can for any considerable time wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which is the true one."

This is especially true for those who provide leadership in Christ's Church. Look at verse 4. What bothers Jesus so is that the religious teachers kept making it more and more difficult for their congregations to bear the burden of the law. Jesus is not opposed to the law of Moses, but instead of trying to make us learn and obey the 613 commandments in the Torah, plus all of the oral tradition that the Pharisees added, Jesus summed up the law clearly and simply into two sides of the one coin of love. When Jesus said he offered a yoke which was easy and a burden which was light, this is what he meant.

The Church today falls into the same trap as Jesus was preaching against when it suggests that people need to do good deeds to earn salvation. The message of Scripture is grace upon grace, followed by grateful living, marked by obedience to the law of love for God and neighbor. That is the finger we lift to

help, 'the finger of God', which we offer all of you who feel burdened by what you were taught God demanded of you.

William Barclay writes that Jesus is teaching here against religious legalists. "Here is the test of any presentation of religion. Does it make it wings to lift a man up, or a deadweight to drag him down?" Friends, if thinking about being a Christian depresses you, then we need to talk. You are not seeing the wings that religion offers to lift you up.

So, the first part character cleansing we need is to remove hypocrisy from our lives, living honestly with God and our neighbors, and from our religious teaching, offering a message of love built around grace and forgiveness, not the burdens of the law.

The second cleansing that Jesus wants us to undergo is to rid our personalities of vanity and arrogance, acting as if we are more important than other people by using our positions to berate or demean others. This is the point Jesus is making in verse 8. He is telling the Rabbis in his audience that they are not to elevate themselves higher than the one Teacher, who is Jesus.

Instead, Jesus says, recognize that you are all brothers and sisters in the eyes of God. We are permitted to use the titles of Minister, Elder and Deacon,

but only if they are seen as words to describe the functions of different types of servants. The key to understanding this verse is that titles represent differences in what people do within the church, not the essence of who they are.



We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, so while we may use titles to differentiate roles, we do not use titles to differentiate value to God. There is but one Teacher, one God, who alone deserves praise and glory. God and God alone is worthy of our worship.

All of these behaviors and traits which Jesus wants transformed out of the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven are to be replaced with one characteristic: humility (cf. Matt. 23:12.) If we truly want to reside in heaven's kingdom, then we seek not to exalt ourselves but rather to humble ourselves so that God will exalt us.

What Jesus teaches here are the top three principles which define the Christian religion, and which should mark Christian's lives. John Calvin famously writes in his Institutes that the first, second and third most important precepts of our religion are humility, humility, humility. To be humble is to 'quit of the disease of self-love and ambition...under the blinding influences of which he thinks more

highly of himself that he ought to think (and instead) see himself as he really is, by looking into the faithful mirror of Scripture.'

That mirror of Scripture reveals:

-Proverbs 15:33: *'Humility comes before honor'*.

-James 4:6: *'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'*.

-1 Peter 5:5: *"Humble yourselves...under God's almighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."*

Philippians 2:8 is the most famous teaching about the perfect humility of Jesus we are called to model.

There is but one Jesus, one God. The fact that Jesus shows perfect humility demonstrates how highly God values that characteristic in us. Listen to the glory reserved for our Lord, the Humble Servant:

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2: 9-11)*

It is for Jesus alone to receive this praise, but here is the promise to all who said 'yes' to our poll. We, the humble servants, who are willing to allow the Spirit to transform our natural tendencies toward vanity, arrogance and hypocrisy, into the kingdom characteristic of humility, we will be exalted, lifted up, right to the throne of Jesus where we, with all the saints who from their labors rest, will bow before our Savior and cry out with the voices of millions upon millions of saints and angels:

*“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.”* (Revelation 11:15)

Amen? Amen!