

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**THIRD SUNDAY OF PENTECOST**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“HYPOCRISY OR INTEGRITY”**  
**Matthew 7:21-27**  
**June 1, 2008**  
**10:00 A.M. Service**

From a church signboard: **“Don’t stay away from church because there are so many hypocrites. There is always room for one more.”** Hypocrisy is more often a subject of humor than a source of consternation. We may think it is not a serious problem, yet we cannot avoid the fact that hypocrisy received Jesus’ most scathing denunciations.

A certain preacher once delivered a sermon called **“Seven Steps to Successful Hypocrisy.”** Our culture prizes nothing so much as success, he said, and, while we are all hypocrites to one degree or another, we are not as hypocritical as we could be. If we’re going to be hypocrites anyway, why not become really successful hypocrites? The “seven steps to successful hypocrisy” were: **1.** Remember: it pays to be religious; **2.** Learn how to talk a good game; **3.** Volunteer only for highly visible activities; **4.** Never pray except in public; **5.** Worship the Bible, but don’t read it; **6.** Never let your religion follow you home; **7.** Never think about judgment. This “tongue-in-cheek” approach makes some serious points about the nature of hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy, like all things human, was born in the Garden of Eden. The first couple made a feeble and failed attempt to deceive God. The only thing that has changed is increasing proficiency of the human practice of duplicity. Several hundred years before Christ, an ancient Greek, Aesop, warned against the person **“who can blow hot and cold with the same breath.”** Hypocrisy is insidious. It is universally condemned, yet it is present to some degree in all of us. The classic image of hypocrisy is the wolf in sheep’s clothing, but it is seldom as simple as that. The hypocrisy of another person may be blatantly obvious to us, yet we may be largely blind to our own. Hypocrisy is subtle. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, hypocrisy is the invisible

evil: **“For neither man nor angel can discern / Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks / Invisible, except to God alone.”**

Jesus was outspoken about the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. His diatribe against them, in Matthew 23, essentially *defines* hypocrisy. They preach, but they do not practice. They do their deeds to be seen by others. They may distort the laws of Israel, and neglect the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith. Their goodness is external only, and they are corrupt within. This chapter contains some of Jesus’ strongest language. We don’t have to wonder what Jesus thinks of hypocrisy!

Long ago it was said that **“hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue.”** (La Rochefaucauld) Hypocrisy is spiritual in nature. It expresses the ambiguity of the human condition and the personal nature of sin and evil. Hypocrisy reflects the alienated self in its estrangement from God. It is when we have not accepted ourselves that we fear we are unacceptable to others. This is why we work so hard to project what we think are more acceptable images of ourselves. If we were genuinely secure in God’s love of us as we are, we could present ourselves to others as we are.

Hypocrisy, then, is based in insecurity. Hypocrisy is pretending to be something we are not. It may or may not involve pretending to be good or pious. In Bruce Marshall’s novel, *The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith* there is a reference to **“the new hypocrisy,”** meaning, **“In the old days people pretended to be better than they were, but now they pretend to be worse.”** School teachers today find this phenomenon even among pre-teens. That hypocrisy is not a healthy condition is evident by the heavy toll it takes on us. Hypocrisy, unlike other vices, can’t be practiced only occasionally. It is a full-time job. Anne Morrow Lindbergh said **“the most exhausting thing in life is being insincere.”** What is more exhausting than pretension? What is more debilitating than duplicity?

This exhaustion is addressed by Jesus. **“Come to me,”** he said, **“all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”** (Mt 11:28) This isn’t merely physical rest. Jesus calls it **“rest for your souls.”** (11:29) The grace that redeems our lives is God’s unconditional love. God loves us as we are, and in such acceptance is the amazing possibility of self-acceptance. To the extent that we accept ourselves, we are free from hypocrisy.

In today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says not everyone who says to him, "**Lord, Lord,**" will enter the kingdom of heaven. Rather, it is those who actually *do* the will of God who will enter. Those who both *hear* and *do* what Jesus teaches are wise, like people who build their houses on a rock instead of on the sand.

The opposite of hypocrisy is not moral goodness or spiritual piety. We do not necessarily overcome hypocrisy by becoming what we have pretended to be. Hypocrisy is the fractured, confusing predicament of a divided self. Its opposite is wholeness or integrity. Wholeness means being integrated. You are not fragmented, diffused, all in pieces. You are whole. You have character - - dependable and consistent character. The people we depend on most are usually those with some measure of integrity. They possess self-knowledge, and we can trust them to be who they are. To understand integrity, just think of Jesus.

Integrity is not achieved in an instant. It is the developing nature of a life well-lived. We grow in integrity, which means we become more and more who we truly are. Integrity is not something we sense in ourselves so much as something others perceive in us. Like love, it is not self-conscious. It begins in our knowledge of God's unconditional love. In a world of shifting sands, it is the rock on which we should build the house of life.

The Roman orator Cicero considered hypocrisy the basest form of villainy. The hypocrite, he said, "**at the moment he is most false, takes care to appear most virtuous.**" The seriousness of hypocrisy is seen, first, in its inevitable destruction of relationships - - the hypocrite cannot be trusted. Second, it is seen in the hypocrite's own loss of self-regard. Only a spiritual awakening can transform human duplicity into personal integrity. Jesus condemned the one and personified the other.

If you wish to grow in integrity and become who you truly are, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.