

Hypocrisy: the Compliment Vice Pays to Virtue

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 1995.
Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Hypocrisy - the one sin in the 20th century that everybody agrees on. Liberals, conservatives, it doesn't matter, everybody agrees, hypocrisy is a sin. Hypocrisy is possibly the only sin we all agree on in the 20th century.

Hypocrisy - what is it? Jimmy Swaggart preaches against pornography and then he gets arrested for visiting a prostitute. He's a hypocrite. The leader of the synagogue accused Jesus of sabbath breaking when, he, himself broke the sabbath.^{He's a hypocrite.} What's hypocrisy? Hypocrisy is when we privately practice the very things we publicly condemn.

Somebody has said, "Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue." In other words, true hypocrites perform a valuable function in society. By being discreet and secretive in pursuing their vices, they can publicly support morality and family values and God's laws. "Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue."

Today the last thing anybody wants to be is a hypocrite. We'll go to any length to avoid being exposed as a hypocrite. So what do we do? We sin openly so nobody can accuse us of being a hypocrite. We pursue our age old vices with as much energy as ever, but instead of having the decency to be discreet, we now flout our sins in public. We claim that our vices have been turned to virtue. "At least I'm not a hypocrite," we say. Nobody wants to be a hypocrite anymore.

Once upon a time, a church member who felt unfulfilled in marriage might have a discreet affair, often in another city. Why be discreet? Because they knew they were doing wrong. They knew

adultery destroys families, communities and nations not to speak of their own reputation. They were hypocrites.

But the last thing anybody wants to be today is a hypocrite. Today a person who feels unfulfilled in marriage is likely not only to establish a sexual liaison among friends and co-workers but also to discuss the matter freely with anyone who will listen, including a spouse. And very likely we hear that person say, "At least I'm not a hypocrite!" Today the vice of adultery is liable to be called the virtue of personal fulfillment.^{The vice of greed - conspicuous consumption language of locker room - broadcast nationwide as free speech} Why? Because the last thing anybody wants to be today is a hypocrite.

But are we any better off? Give me a practicing hypocrite any day over a person who claims that darkness is light. Give me a person who professes that God's laws are good - even when they disobey them - over a person who believes there is no right and wrong.^{Give me a practicing hypocrite any day over someone who boasts about breaking God's laws.} We're no better off by practicing our sins openly in order to avoid being called a hypocrite - in fact, society is far worse off.

So, how do we deal with hypocrisy? Not by flouting our sins. Not by calling our sins, virtues. Not by boasting self righteously, "At least I'm not a hypocrite". At the Communion Table none of us can honestly say, "At least I'm not a hypocrite." The world isn't divided hypocrites and nonhypocrites. Down deep we know our lives are compromised. That's why we take the bread and wine. We come confessing our hypocrisy. We trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even repentant hypocrites are welcome at his table.

Let us pray: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.