

September 27, 2009

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 / II Corinthians 5:6-10 / Luke 12:1-3

With God Secrets Are Not Secrets

For the last few weeks, we've seen Jesus warning and taking the Pharisees to task (and their cohorts in crime the Teachers or Exerts in the Law) for many of their faulty, misleading, self-righteous and spiritually harmful understandings and proclamations regarding the faith.

And I won't summarize them all again, since I did that last week! But I will say this: Jesus isn't through with them yet! He takes one last parting shot at them, before moving on to other things, and He does so before a crowd that numbered thousands upon thousands!

In verses 37-52 of chapter 11, He confronted them DIRECTLY, face to face, warning them to cease from their sinful, grace-abolishing, twisted and self-righteous errors, which not only hindered those who were seeking to enter the Kingdom of God, but also heaped unnecessary burdens upon the spiritual shoulders of those who had embraced the faith (vv. 46, 52).

And today He takes this opportunity to PUBLICLY warn the huge crowd of people who gathered on this occasion of the spiritual dangers inherent in their self-righteous, self-justifying, graceless, holier-than-thou, or Pharisaical scheme of salvation. / A scheme which basically declared that one needed to earn their salvation by their works, rather than receive it from God as a free and gracious gift given to all who would humble themselves, admit their inability to save themselves, and place all their hope for salvation in Jesus.

Jesus offered salvation (and by that I mean healing, forgiveness, acceptance with God, liberation from the dominion of sin and eternal life) as a free gift, to anyone who would merely take it from the graciously outstretched hand of God by faith!

The Pharisees, on the other hand, told people that in order to be accepted by God, you had to earn it, deserve it, work for it or make yourself worthy to receive it — something you did by cleaning up your act morally, and then flawlessly and habitually carrying out the multitude of external rituals and legalisms I've mentioned over the last two weeks.

With Jesus, even the worst of people could come, "just as they were," and find forgiveness, pardon and acceptance. / But with the Pharisees everyone was kept at arms distance until they passed the entrance test and therefore proved themselves worthy of being included in their exclusive little religious club.

Thus when the crowd of many thousands gathered (and you can be sure they gathered yearning to hear Jesus message of salvation by grace, rather than the same old, same old Pharisaical message of salvation by works), Jesus takes the opportunity to warn each one and tell them ***THE TWO MAJOR THINGS*** the legalistic message of salvation by works produces in people, followed by the one thing that can lead to it's cure!

So let's take a look and see why it is that Jesus is so opposed to the Pharisaical message of salvation by works. Or I should say, the other reasons He opposes it in addition to the many we've already seen in verses 39-52 of chapter 11!

The **FIRST** comes to us in the last part of verse 1, where we hear Jesus tell the huge crowd: ***"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy."*** For Jesus that was one of the most distasteful things about legalism — to some degree it causes people to fall into the sin of "hypocrisy."

What is a hypocrite? Surprisingly it's meaning in the Bible is a bit softer than the meaning attached to it today, because in the Bible the word "hypocrite" simply means what the Greek word "hypokrinomai" originally meant: ***"One who plays a part on a stage."*** It was a word used to describe actors who performed in stage plays and thus played the part of someone they were not. That's it!

Thus we could say (using the original meaning of the word) that Anthony Hopkins was being a "hypocrite" when he played the part of Richard Nixon in Oliver Stone's movie by that name. And likewise, Forest Whittaker was such a good "hypocrite" when he "played the part" of Idi Amin in Kevin McDonalds film "The Last King of Scotland" that he received an academy award for his performance! His hypocrisy was superb!

Thus, what Jesus is saying is that whenever someone adopts a legalistic scheme of salvation, or works-righteousness, they will inherently need, to some degree, to become actors! You can't get around it! And that not my take on it, that's Jesus take on it! Legalism always leads to some degree of hypocrisy or the need to act or pretend that we are other than what we really are.

In some senses this word "hypocrisy" is a summary statement of everything He's been saying since He started taking them to task in chapter 11, verse 39. In fact, the repeated phrase, ***"Scribes, Pharisees hypocrites!"*** in Matthew 23, means ***"Scribes, Pharisees, actors!"***

And in reference to these Pharisees, they were “hypocrites” in the sense that they were sinners like you and I, yet “played the part” (on the outside and for public display) of being holy and righteous men, when in reality (or on the inside) they were as sinful as the people they judged and condemned for being “sinners.”

They had simply learned the fine art of sinning respectably, or limiting themselves to respect-able sins, like being judgmental, or condemning, or critical, or self-righteously pious.

And what Jesus is saying is that any person on earth who thinks or believes or teaches or conveys the idea that one’s salvation or acceptance with God is dependent on their work’s can’t help but fall, to some degree into hypocrisy. In some it’s not as blatant as with others, but like “yeast,” it does get mixed into the soul of every person who adopts a legalistic scheme of salvation. It’s often imperceptible at first (like yeast mixed into a batch of dough) but over time it grows until it produces blatant hypocrisy.

That’s what Jesus says (and He’s not being judgmental). He’s merely stating a fact. The belief that I earn my salvation by good works, or by being better than others who are worse sinners, can’t help but produce in me the need to act. The need to act like I’m holy and righteous, since no one can be holy or righteous by their own efforts alone.

Speaking in an all-inclusive way about fallen humanity, Solomon said in Eccles. 7:20: ***“There is not a righteous man on earth, who does what is right and never sins.”*** And Paul stated the same thing in Rom. 3:10 where he quotes from Psalms 14 and 53, and says: ***“There is none righteous, no not one.”*** And they are not just speaking about heathens or unbelievers, they’re speaking about everyone all-inclusive.

Biblically speaking even the “righteous” are not righteous! Abraham is called “righteous,” but a mere glance at his life shows he was not always righteous. / Noah is called “righteous,” but he too was less than righteous. / Jacob is called “righteous,” though it’s obviously not on the basis of his own actions or lifestyle. / Even King David is called “righteous” though murder and adultery and poor parenting can hardly be called “righteous acts.”

No! The “righteous” (according to the Bible) were people who “lived by faith” (Hab. 2:4 / Rom. 1:17). And as Paul makes clear in the verses that follow, it’s not faith plus their own efforts to be righteous. It’s faith in the Only Truly Righteous Being that has ever existed! The one who promised that by grace and grace alone He would credit His own righteousness to us if we would only believe!

You see, the glorious and life-transforming message of the Bible, which enables us to be real and honest and transparent about who we are and what we struggle with, rather than people who hide behind a mask and act the part of someone we are not, is the message of a righteousness that comes from God as a gift credited to faith!

When we realize that God's acceptance of us is by GRACE, through a FAITH that joins us to Jesus and His sinless righteousness (which cannot be altered, stained or polluted by the sin and unrighteousness that dwells within us), we are freed to be us, as we limp along down the messy path toward sanctification — crutches, warts, scars, glaring imperfections and all.

My identity is no longer "Jeff, the one who must tow the line, and convince others he is righteous," but "Jeff, the one accepted by grace, and now able to extend that same grace to others."

To acknowledge the truth of my own sinfulness and honestly believe that the only thing that gains me acceptance with God is the righteous merits of Jesus applied to my stead by faith alone, liberates me from the need to hide things about myself, or pretend, or act like I'm someone I'm not, which I can't help but do if I believe my acceptance with God is dependent upon my performance, good character or an elevated degree of sanctification.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. Those who have adopted a pharisaical or legalistic view of salvation by works, and thus become infected by the "*yeast of the Pharisees*," or the need to pretend or act, will always wrestle with two selves — the darker side that we hide, and the better side that we let others see. That's what an actor is: Someone with their own personality (their real self) who plays the part of someone they're not (the fake self they put on for the sake of the play or movie).

That's what hypocrisy involves — the contrast between the real us and the us we portray in public (for others to see). And the key is this: The more of the "pharisaical yeast" we adopt, the more the contrast between those two selves will be.

Legalistic or self-righteous ways of thinking actually fuel the disparity between the self we KNOW ourselves to be (which struggles and wrestles with sin and temptation like anyone else — even the people they judge) and the self we PORTRAY to others (which appears to have it all together and wrestle with nothing or at least nothing big, like those others we try not to be like)!

Which means this: *At least one of the reasons Jesus strikes out at pharisaical legalism is because it makes it impossible for us to ever be whole! For those two conflicting selves to be joined in one real us! It makes it impossible to ever be a unified person, where we can*

live as if everyone knew our deepest darkest secrets — because one day, according to this passage, they will!

Legalistic thinking makes it impossible to ever bridge the gap between the self we put forth in public for others to see and the self we know ourselves to be in private, where we may wrestle (dare we say it) with the same things we condemn in others — like anger, lust, spiritual apathy, discontent, lack of zeal, ingratitude, unloving thoughts, jealousy, envy, greed, selfish attitudes, gossip, unforgiveness and the like.

It can actually create an inner disparity of conflicting selves that becomes so great, that the darker, inner, hidden self will often overpower the respectable self, and reveal itself for all to see — to the great astonishment of all who thought they knew the person.

Someone who was thought to be of stellar character — a zealous, tireless worker in the church, all of a sudden, and seemingly out of nowhere, does something that shocks everyone who thought they knew the person.

The quiet hard-working employee who has multiple plaques on the wall for exceptional achievements is caught embezzling thousands of dollars of their clients money. / The pastor who condemns adultery from the pulpit has an affair. / Or the deacon is hauled off to jail for beating his wife or children. (Not far from my house In Massachusetts a respected deacon at a local Baptist church, pulled off the road, opened his trunk, grabbed his 55lb bow, and shot a man who had been tailing him and making gestures to him on the highway. Of course it was front page news!)

And its not that we didn't know such people. It's simply that we only knew the side of the person they let us see — the side they put forth for public display in the hopes that others would think it was their whole self.

And I reiterate what I said last week and the week before — It's a problem we all have to some degree. I have yet to meet a person who is a completely open book, and doesn't hide any of the things they struggle with from the sight of others.

So what is Jesus word to us? Legalism leads to a divided self and grace leads to a unified self.

Grace brings wholeness while works righteousness leads to an ongoing conflict between the darker side of ourselves that we don't want people to see and the more respectable self that we put on for public display.

So what's the answer? Jesus tells us in verses 2-3. That's our **THIRD** point — the cure for legalism or the divided self or hypocrisy it spawns. What is it? That's what Jesus goes on to give us when He says: ***"There is NOTHING concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed (or shouted) from the rooftops."***

You see, the first step in being delivered from a self-righteous or legalistic mindset is being convinced that you cannot, at any time, or in any way, hide anything from God! That's Jesus point when He says: ***"There is NOTHING concealed..."*** God knows all and God sees all. You cannot slip anything by him!

But it's not just the knowledge that we can't hide anything from God. It's that plus the added knowledge that He will at some point expose all that He knows for all to see!

One of the greatest fears a legalist has is that some point they will be exposed. They will be shown to be the actor that they are. That people will discover what they are really like. Nothing scares them more than the dreaded thought that at some point they may lose their ability to hide their real self. Yet at some point, says Jesus, ***"the things we have said in the darkness will be heard in the daylight, and the things we whispered in the inner rooms will be shouted from the rooftops for all to hear!"***

That is, the people we are trying to impress and convince we are other than we truly are will one day be let in on all our secrets!

And **THAT** is not only what the legalist FEARS the most, it's also one of the only things that will lead to their CURE when believed.

How does it work? Like this: Realizing that there is nothing they can hide from God (not the slightest thought, word, whisper, feeling, affection, desire or deed) they are driven to see their need to come clean now, before God takes the initiative to expose it to all.

In fact, that's part of the reasoning behind confession. Exposing our sin diminishes it's power. Exposing our struggles lessens their intensity. Confession what we wrestle with enables the inner us and outer us to be more unified and whole!

That, I believe, is at least part of what James means when he says: ***"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed."*** It's true — confession is good

for the soul! It's a step toward wholeness and the resolution of the conflict between the two divided selves.

The problem is that the legalist doesn't want sin exposed — *except in others!* They don't mind it when others to confess their inner struggles. But they are scared silly to think they might be asked to reciprocate by confess their own struggles! That horrifies them!

You see, this not simply an empty threat on Jesus part to try and scare people! It is the first step of Jesus remedy for hypocrisy. It is His prescription for healing the divided soul! His remedy for abolishing self-righteousness. For helping all people see (and especially religious people who tend to deny it the most) that they have a desperate need for the grace of God and for the good news offered in the Gospel!

LISTEN: What we all need to know is this — there is nothing we have done, thought, felt, desired, spoken, watched or whispered in secret, that God will not at some point in history expose for all to see — especially when it comes to those things we used as a basis for judging and condemning others while being guilty of wrestling with them, or doing them, ourselves.

This is Jesus initial remedy for the sin of self-righteousness. These are healing words! They let us know it does no good to pretend that we're righteous, for at some point along the line God will reveal to all, that we are not! And He will let everyone else in on that little secret!

Which brings us to my **LAST** point. Let me give you an example of how this truth works, and to do so, I will use myself. Because when I first came to Christ, I was blatantly self-righteous (rather than subtly self-righteous as most of us learn to be over time)! In some cases I was embarrassingly self-righteous! Not because I tried to be, but because the pastor instructing me was highly legalistic and as a new Christian, I believed whatever he taught (since I didn't know any better).

Thus my initial introduction into the Christian faith was one where I was exposed to the "yeast of the Pharisees" (or a works-righteousness) as soon as I was converted. In fact, I look back at those days with a twinge of regret, and wish I could go back and live those years all over again, because back then I did not understand the grace of God.

I thought (because that's what I was taught) that the key to the Christian life was to measure up and tow the mark and try harder and make sure you didn't mess up. The emphasis was always on being a good witness and not dishonoring God by your failures and fear of exposure and an

unceasing focus on “don’t do this and don’t do that.” So much so that it became a bit depressing. That’s the frequent down-side of a works-righteousness approach to salvation.

And it affected my prayer life, because the sermons always implied that the longer you prayed each day, the more pleased God was with you, or the more He loved you, and if you missed your prayer time because you mistakenly overslept, or because you didn’t plan for that unexpected interruption, God was terribly disappointed with you and somehow loved you less.

Likewise, I kept a stiff upper lip and would even use pious words or pray as if all was well with my soul even when I was struggling or in spiritual turmoil. I prayed as if God didn’t know what I was really wrestling with or how I felt, or that He was somehow unaware that my words didn’t match what I was really thinking and feeling!

Then at some point in a conversation with someone (I don’t remember who it was) he told me that the best way to pray was to be honest with God, and tell Him the exact condition of my soul and exactly what I was feeling and the temptations I was wrestling with — since He knew it all anyway! “How foolish to pretend when we pray,” he said, “as if the God who knows and sees all doesn’t see right through it!”

And I know you’re probably saying, “Jeff, that’s so basic, how could you not have known that?” And my response? I was raised in a church that never taught it, and also because my first exposure to evangelical Christianity after my conversion was one heavily steeped in works-righteousness.

And **LISTEN**: The only way you can sustain a works-righteousness scheme of salvation is to somehow deny in your mind the all-encompassing omniscience of God! Because once you really believe that NOTHING slips by Him and you can’t put one over on Him in any way, no matter how hard you try, you start to become more real in your prayer life.

It stops being something you do for 20 minutes to an hour each day, and becomes an incessant ongoing transparent dialogue with God!

In fact, you stop keeping track of how long you pray each day, realizing that’s NOT the issue! And as you become more real in your prayer life it starts to run over into all the other areas of your life.

And that’s not all. Once we know God not only knows all, and sees all, but intends to expose all for all to see, it pulls the rug out from underneath our hopes of ever being saved by our

performance or keeping our struggles and secrets secret, and makes us see our desperate need for a salvation that is of grace from beginning to end.

That way, when my life is displayed before all of you (and I do believe it will be) for all to see, I can watch it without shame, acknowledging then, what I should acknowledge every day: "That its not by works of the law that I have done, but the sheer grace of God in Jesus."

No one has said it better than Augustus Toplady and his famous hymn Rock of Ages:

*"Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy laws demands, Could my zeal no respite know,
could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, Thou must save and Thou alone.
Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked come to Thee for dress,
Helpless come to Thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly, wash me Savior lest I die."*

God knows ALL, my friends. He sees ALL. And some day he will expose it ALL for ALL to see!
If we are acting or hiding things, even the thought of that will scare the wits out of us!

But that's the whole point:

If I can't bear the thought, it's probably because there's still some degree of works-righteousness imbedded in my thinking.

Because if I knew it was by grace, I'd say "Show it. Show it all to anyone. Show it to the whole world. That way all will know that my salvation was by nothing but the sheer undeserved grace of God."

In fact, after God is done, it will be evident to all that no one, at any time in history, was ever saved by anything but grace alone!