



How real is your religion?

Matthew 23:1-12

I want to talk to you about an extremely personal matter—and that is the genuine reality of your religion. You might well wonder about your preacher having the temerity to suggest that it is anything other than real for each one of us.

My response is to refer you to Jesus Christ, who was prepared to question the scribes and the Pharisees and their practice of religion, which resulted in them laying heavy burdens upon the shoulders of people without lifting a finger to provide assistance (Matthew 23:4).

Jesus Christ teaches us that true religion frees people from their burdens – or at least helps them to carry such burdens more easily.

The ethical teaching of Jesus is not at odds with the scribes and Pharisees, but the example of the teachers, as far as Jesus is concerned, must be avoided. It is where the popular saying, “Do as they say, but not as they do ...” originates. The injunction is to do what they say, but to take care because: “...they do not practise what they preach,” (Matthew 23:3).

It is difficult to find anyone who has a kind word to say about hypocrites. No-one wants to be seen in this way; few people want to be around one; and the last thing one would want to be called is a hypocrite. Hypocrites are, by definition, deceptive, two-faced as we say, and as such are dangerous.

The Wall Street Journal reported how a congressman, addressing the House of Representatives, said: “Never before have I heard such ill-formed, wimpy, back-stabbing drivel as that just uttered by my respected colleague, the distinguished gentleman from Ohio.”

We want to be authentic about our faith; the practice day-by-day of what it means to live out that Christian life.

Politics has much to teach us on this difficult subject. There are plenty of examples in the actions of politicians in Macquarie Street, Canberra, Strasbourg, London and Washington. In such a context, many are adept at playing the game of “Gotcha” when an individual is caught out in the revelation of a weakness. Aspects of a person’s life can be exposed quite explicitly and cause great damage to them and their families:

- we see it at election time
- we have seen it in the dual citizenship debate
- we are regularly drawn to matters of self-importance displayed in public life.

Theatron is the word we translate “to be seen”. In the context of the theatre, the concept of hypocrisy is often demonstrated. On many a stage, a person is legitimately given permission to pretend to be someone other than who they are. We even say that a person is “playing the part” of a particular character.

John Dryden, a seventeenth century English poet, came from a large family of 14 children, born in a rectory into a strong Puritan family. He wrote:-

“A man so various that he seem’d to be
Not one, but all mankind’s epitome.
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;
Was everything by starts, and nothing long:



But, in the course of one revolving moon,
Was chemist, fiddler, statesman and buffoon.”

We need prophets today who are prepared to expose our own hypocrisy. Jesus addressed the matter very directly and was saying that leaders must choose the other ‘H’ word (which of course is Humility), if they are to model authentic discipleship and challenge hypocrisy.

There are many things that help us to gain a sense of humility:

- A beautiful, clear Northern Territory sky that reminds us of the God of all creation, compared to our tiny existence
- The sound of an amazingly gifted musician playing a beautiful piece of music
- The cry of a new-born child, raising our joy of life.

These are things that we may encounter day-by-day, but nowhere are we drawn to humility more than as we learn more of Jesus Christ. Such humility calls us away from pride or arrogance—to love and grace.

Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of placing an intolerable burden on the backs of the people. We cannot avoid the fact that religion, when it is hypocritical, often imposes a catalogue of demands, as well as impossible prohibitions—and those who make such demands upon others are unable to bear the load themselves.

In the time of Jesus, some of those who practised religion were extremely proud of their religious identity. Having said that, we need to be very careful to recognise that it was not only Jesus who was critical of the Pharisees, but also the Jewish Talmud itself, which was the body of authoritative Jewish teaching.

Drawing on that Talmud tradition, there is a description of different kinds of Pharisee, of which four are:

- The Shoulder Pharisee—who has good deeds carried on his shoulder for all to see.
- The Self-Afflicting Pharisee—who would avoid every appearance of evil, even if attracted to it.
- The Humpback Pharisee—who exaggerated their every attempt at humility by their posture as they walked.
- The Wait a Little Pharisee—and this sounds as though it has a real contemporary feel of postponing good, sometimes for valid reasons, especially when action may be required.

Religion must never be a burden

Jesus reminded his hearers that they must practise what they preach. It is a word for all of us. It is not enough to have the right doctrines. It is not enough to know all the laws. It’s not enough to correctly commend all the rules.

It is easy to fall into the trap of outer-significance. In so many aspects of our lives, this theme is important. As one writer put it:

- it’s OK to be thought of as a teacher, if you are a teacher in deed
- it’s OK to be called father, if you are a father in deed
- it’s OK to be called doctor, if you are a doctor in deed
- it’s OK to be called mother, if you are a mother in deed.



The reason why each of these thoughts is correct is that it is not the title we receive that makes the difference, but the deeds that consistently flow from our lives.

The worst burdens are those we place on others. The criticism of Jesus strikes powerfully at the way in which scribes and Pharisees placed burdens upon people's shoulders by the demands they made. Perhaps it is these burdens that Jesus had in mind when he called people to him in the following way: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," (Matthew 11:28).

The way of Jesus is a way of religion that sets us free from burdens – or, perhaps on occasions, helps us to face the burdens that life brings to us.

When our religion becomes a burden upon our lives, it is invariably the result of not allowing the joy and presence of God to become our freedom. We carry a weight on our shoulders as a result of not discovering what the words of John made so clear for us: "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed," (John 8:36).

The story is told of a father who complained about the amount of time his family spent in front of the television set. His children were near-obsessed with watching cartoons and, as a result, neglected their homework. His wife preferred soap operas. What was his solution? "As soon as the football season is over, I am going to pull the plug out!"

George Herbert, the wonderful writer and poet often described as The Country Parson, reflected, "None knows the weight of another's burden." His writings went on to conclude, "Only God."

There is an old gospel hymn "Days are filled with sorrow and care" that has a refrain which reads:-
"Burdens are lifted at Calvary
Jesus is very near!"

The cross is the place where burdens are dealt with, which is described superbly by John Bunyan in his wonderful *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The simple definition of a burden has to be "the load you carry!" We take it further when we talk about it in everyday speak:

- the burden of responsibility
- an elderly close relative worries me and is a burden to me
- buying houses often places a financial burden upon young couples.

Jesus lifts our burdens and offers the pattern of love and grace, which releases us.

Religion must never be performance

Jesus also criticises the scribes and Pharisees for making a spectacle of their religion. They wore special religious symbols, so people might recognise their piety (v.5); they had large phylacteries on their foreheads and fringes on their garments for all to see.

The teaching of Jesus reminds us in his stories that there were those who wanted the best seats at feasts (v.6); and loved to be greeted in the marketplace and have people call them by special titles (v.7).



When we find ourselves in this kind of situation, our religion is a performance and not an exercise of prayer.

I am told that in the middle of the last century, when the tourist industry was booming in Southern France, it was such an important status symbol on the French Riviera to have a balcony on your apartment.

To address this need, it was quite common to see balconies painted on the walls of apartment houses. People even painted laundry hanging on clothes lines, just to give it a touch of reality. Religion that is a performance is like a painted façade on the outside of such an apartment.

There was a preacher/pastor/minister being interviewed for a job by a pastoral search committee. An English teacher chaired the committee and really wanted to be sure that the future leader spoke correctly. He asked the candidate, "When the hen is in the nest, does she sit or set?" The hopeful pastor was frustrated. He did not know what to say and a great deal seemed to be at stake.

Finally, he replied, "It really doesn't matter if she is sitting or setting. What I want to know is this: when she cackles is she laying or lying?"

Our lives need to be lifted above the level of a performance. A rather pompous-looking Christian leader was in conversation with a group of young people on the importance of living the Christian life. He asked, "Why do people call me a Christian?" After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Maybe it's because they don't really know you!"

Jesus Christ knew all too well that some of the religious leaders were deep into performance and there needed to be a change of direction.

- genuine discipleship speaks of love
- genuine commitment continues in the face of life's burdens
- genuine character grows out of faithful discipleship.

I sometimes make an occasional late night shopping trip, especially if we have been working long hours. I have learned, however, that what you should look for is not just the price of the items, but their cost ratios – and when the store is empty you get time to do that. Some tins are holding less for the same price! The external packaging doesn't always show us what's inside. We can wrap ourselves up every day in the same packaging: nice clothes, big smile and friendly demeanour – yet still be less than what we appear to be.

Genuine religion reflects Jesus Christ

In one verse, there is a summing up of what Jesus has frequently told the disciples—that the greatest among us will be servant: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted," (v.12).

Following World War II, what was known as the Worker Priest Movement started in France. These priests were committed to working out their calling in the secular world so they might bring the gospel to people at the very places where they lived and worked. There was much to learn from this movement which calls every one of us, whether as priests or ministers or the 'laos' (laity), to live out discipleship in the real setting of daily life.



The Pharisees in Jesus' day were extremely proud of their religious identity. The tragic thing for us is that as we have read the words of Jesus, and seen the hypocrisy of some, the religion of the Pharisees is now synonymous with sham, show and hypocrisy.

Francois Fenelon, a great writer on holiness, was the court preacher for King Louis XIV of France in the seventeenth century.

One Sunday, when the king and his attendants arrived at chapel for the regular service, no-one else was there but the preacher. King Louis demanded, "What does this mean?" Fenelon replied, "I had published that you would not be at church today, in order that your Majesty might see who really serves God in truth, rather than to flatter the king."

Pharisees enjoyed the best seats in the synagogues; at meals they sat beside the host and were given pride of place. In the synagogue of Jesus' day, the best seats were the front seats and the back seats were for children and those considered unimportant. It is interesting how that has completely reversed itself in church life in many parts of the world today.

Robert Redford was not only a gifted actor but, like Clint Eastwood before him, he has gone behind the camera to direct and produce films. One day he was walking through a hotel lobby. Someone saw him and followed him into the lift. The person asked with great excitement, "Are you the real Robert Redford?" As the doors closed, he replied, "Only when I'm alone."

No person can wear two faces for an extended period; one to his or herself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the truth! It is too easy to fall into the trap of outer-significance. No sooner do we acquire a little status, than we try to display it as an emblem of importance.

I recall my first appointment and, at the end of that ministry in 1983, the caretaker of the Central Mission came to me and gave me the nameplate from my office door. I played modest and said, "Oh are you sure? I could leave that for the next fellow!" Then I realised he really wouldn't want my nameplate!

We are all to be marked by the reflection of Jesus Christ in our lives—and that is the work of real religion.