

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF END TIME REFORMATION

Does Anyone Notice My Faith?

Matthew 23:1-12 (NIV)

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others. ⁸ “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Jesus mentioned a phylactery. What’s that? A phylactery is a cubic black leather box that orthodox Jewish men wear on their head and their arm during weekday morning prayer that has a couple of select Bible passages on tiny little papers inside of it. You can see it on the picture on the bulletin cover. They do this as a very literal interpretation and application of having God’s Word tied on their hands and bound on their foreheads as commanded in Deuteronomy 11:18. It can serve as a helpful reminder, maybe akin to us wearing a cross, a symbol to remind you what God has done for you, a symbol to remind you to whom you belong and for whom you are living. You have to hand it to the Orthodox Jews. They are noticeably living out their faith in their God and his commands.

Sadly, though, people abused such a reminder. Jesus, in talking about the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, said, “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.” (verses 5-7) Yes, people were noticing them living out their faith, but it was more for show than anything else. They wanted people to label them as hyper or ultra-religious and get the credit that goes with it.

Such a criticism and rebuke from Jesus causes us to reflect and examine ourselves. Why do I wear a cross? Do I wear a big one or a little one? Do I wear it to be seen, as a way that is just a show for other people? How about that Jesus tattoo you have or when you put that ring around your picture on Facebook? Do we do these things just to get noticed by someone so that they think we really love Jesus in order that we can get the respect and prestige and honor and reverence as really good Christians?

If that is our mindset, then we take Jesus’ criticism to heart and humble ourselves. We stop wearing symbols of our faith for show, stop doing things just so that we get noticed by others and praised for our faith. We are called to live out our faith not as a show but as a lowly servant, one who works in the backdrop not trying to get noticed, one who doesn’t take praise but instead redirects it to God saying, “I only served as God gave me the strength. I’m only his tool. May his name be praised!”

However, reflecting on you specifically, the people who worship here at Light of the Valley, I’m hard pressed to pinpoint specific examples of you being very showy about your faith so that you get praise from the rest of us and outsiders. So many more of you, if not the majority of you, like me, don’t want to be noticed for what we do in service to our Lord. We want to blend into the backdrop as servants and simply do things for God because we want to serve him. We want to promote his saving Word but we want to be discreet, quiet about it. So many of you are much more comfortable not being recognized for things like teaching Sunday School, serving on the Church Council, preparing the Lord’s Supper, cleaning the sanctuary, vacuuming, cleaning bathrooms, taking out the trash, mowing the lawn, changing the church sign, folding bulletins, sanitizing, all of that. You encourage and invite people to come and hear God’s Word with you, and the pastor most of the time doesn’t even know when you’re doing that. You don’t make a big show of giving, of donating. You do it in a humble way because you’re just giving back of the riches God has given you. God be praised for how so many of you serve the Lord in such humble ways without wanting or trying to get noticed!

God certainly wants us to serve him in subtle ways and avoid the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who only do things for their faith in order to be seen by people and get their praise. This is their hypocrisy. But do we veer too far the other direction to a different kind of hypocrisy? Am I so quiet about my faith that no one notices what I do for the Lord or would even have any idea that I’m a Christian?

Back in the days prior to COVID when you ate out at a restaurant (or still today if you are fine dining in), do you pray out loud or are you so paranoid of being heard and noticed doing that that you act as if you don't pray and give thanks to the Lord before your meals? When someone talks about what they do on Sunday (or Monday night), do you completely avoid admitting that you love being in church, that you make a point of spending time in worship, hearing God's Word, being refreshed with the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for you and how his perfect life covers over you? Would the person you're talking to have any idea that you belong to a church? Are we so afraid of someone knowing that we are a Christian because then they would be able to look down on us, criticize our faith, and call us a hypocrite because we don't practice what we preach? Do we think the best way to avoid this is to never show we are a Christian either with words or with actions so that no one notices my faith in God?

We may be really good at avoiding the kind of ostentatious hypocrisy like that of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees where everything they do in the name of their faith is done to be seen by people and to get praise from them. But in avoiding this, have we fallen into a different kind of hypocrisy where we don't let our light shine at all? Have we hidden our faith under a bushel basket? Does anyone notice my faith? If so, have we stopped being the light that God made us?

Lord, for when I try to hide my faith, for when I live no differently than the rest of the world even though I claim to be your follower, forgive me. Forgive me for not shining your light by what I say and do. Forgive me for the hypocrisy of hiding my faith.

We put that hypocrisy at the cross. We are here specifically to hear that Jesus dealt with my hypocrisy, paid the penalty for all the times that I hid my faith because I didn't want to get noticed for it. He did this by nailing our hypocrisy to the cross. With the message of his perfect life lived for us, you and I are filled all over again with his perfection. Jesus indeed was the servant of all. He humbled himself to come down from heaven in the first place and live under the very law he created in order to obey it for us. He listened to his church leaders, learned from them, obeyed them. He practiced what he preached, not to get the praise of men, but to live that perfect life for us in our place. He did this so that now we are perfect before him – devoid of all hypocrisy and instead filled with Jesus' humble service to our God and to our neighbors.

Being forgiven of our hypocrisy and filled with Jesus' perfect servant humility, we live out our faith. We're careful to do everything that God has told us to do. We follow the leaders of God's church who said in our second Bible reading, "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12) We encourage, comfort, and urge people to live their faith at home in private and out in the public. We do these things not in ostentatious ways, but we don't do this in secret either. We live out our calling from God so that if someone was observing us that they would see us humbly serving him and be led to him.

So, when you're sitting down to eat at a restaurant (or when you can return to doing that), don't hide your thanks to God. Pray then as you would at home. When someone talks about what they do on Sunday (or Monday nights), don't be shy about telling them that you look forward to coming to church, to learning more about Jesus, about being refreshed with his forgiveness of your sins, to have him build you up so that you can continue to face each and every day. Invite and encourage them to join you. Comfort them with the comfort you yourself have received. And if you're afraid of them calling you out on not practicing what you preach, calling you a hypocrite, remember that you take refuge in the Lord and his Word. He is your Mighty Fortress as our first Bible reading said, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Psalm 46:10-11)

God, help us to live as your humble servants, not being ostentatious with our faith so that we are praised by people, but to live out our calling from you so that people would see you working through our lives, so that by us shining your Light others would know you who forgives all our hypocrisy and fills us with your perfect servant life. Amen.