

Discipleship Unmasked

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us together to turn back to the passage that Myrda read for us in Matthew 6. Let's read again at verse 1. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

I want to think today a little bit about these words under the heading Discipleship Unmasked, and that maybe sounds like a little bit of a funny title, but I hope it's going to make sense as we go through it.

As we said when we did the reading, these words that we're looking at just now come in the Sermon on the Mount, which is one of the most important sections of the New Testament, a magnificent description from Jesus about what life as a follower of Jesus is meant to look like.

And so as we read the Sermon on the Mount, we must always remember that this sermon is giving us lots of instructions, but those instructions are not saying this is how to become a Christian.

These instructions are saying this is how to live as a Christian.

And the great theme of that sermon is that as disciples, we are to be different. So Jesus wants us to stand out from all the brokenness and selfishness and hostility in the world.

[1 : 17] And as we follow him, we are to be visibly different in a beautiful way. And that, in many ways, is just the kind of basic core truth of what our day-to-day lives as disciples of Jesus should be looked like.

So if you work with people who are a nightmare and difficult and harsh and cruel, if you're working among Christians, we should be different. And that's a huge challenge.

It's a struggle. But that's what Jesus wants from us. But being different is hard. And one of the reasons why being different is hard is because we're constantly plagued with pressure and anxiety about what other people think of us.

I'm going to tell you a story that I think I told you before, but some of you won't have heard it. And if you have heard it, just pretend you haven't. A few years ago, I went to watch Carlyway play at the pitch. And I'd gone along and the kids had come with me and we'd taken a football so that the kids could play at the side.

They were much smaller than they are now. And it was fine. Watched the game. Kids had come home earlier and I stayed on to watch a little bit more. And then full time, I came home and I had the football that we'd taken up.

[2 : 33] And so I was going home, just walking back past Mabel's. And I was thinking, oh, is that carrying the ball? I'm going to dribble the ball along the pavement. I was watching the football and it was rekindling my sort of once, well, I didn't ever have any football skill, but my dreams of being a footballer.

So I thought, I'll just dribble the ball along the pavement. And so I rolled away a little bit and everything was okay. And then the ball sort of rolled away a little bit and I put my foot on top of the ball to stop it.

And I don't know what happened, but the next second I was on the ground, flat, as if someone had shot me. And whatever I did, I completely just lost my balance, fell over and I was on the ground.

I was very sore, hurt my shoulder. And my shoulder's never been quite right since. But in that moment, I got up straight away and I wasn't thinking about what happened. I wasn't thinking about my shoulder.

All I was thinking about was, did anybody see me? And I don't know if they did, but that was my thought because you immediately worry what other people think.

[3 : 44] In another way, I want you to imagine that you're sitting here in your pajamas. Would you feel comfortable? That pajamas are very comfortable. And pajamas would be a great, you know,

great attire for church.

Sort of, church clothes are often not uncomfortable, not comfortable. Pajamas, very comfortable. Sitting in one of these lovely chairs in your pajamas would be great. Would you feel comfortable? No. Why? Because of what other people would think.

And in so many ways, this puts pressure on us. In every area of life, at work, at school, in our community, on social media, we are anxious about what other people think.

And this can have a huge influence on our lives as disciples. And Jesus is getting us to think about that here. And we're going to just look at these opening versions of Matthew 6 together under three headings.

And in excellent free church standards, I'm going to have three words all beginning with C, contrasts, constants, and question.

[4 : 48] So, we're going to start thinking about contrasts. Let me ask you, what's the opposite of a disciple?

And your instinctive answer might be, well, an unbeliever. And in many ways, that's true. And that is the key and ultimately the only distinction that matters. We read John 3, 16, whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life.

That's the key distinction. So, you think, what's the opposite of a disciple? Unbeliever. And that's true, absolutely, and massively important. But, in this passage, the focus is a little bit more narrow. Because, according to the Sermon on the Mount, if you ask the question, what's the opposite of being a disciple? The answer is not unbeliever.

The opposite of being a disciple is being a hypocrite. That's the big point that Jesus is making in these opening verses. And in verse 1, he's warning us against living out our Christian lives simply to be seen by others.

[5 : 59] And he gives three examples. He gives the example of giving, of praying, and of fasting. And in each of these, Jesus makes the repeated warning, don't be like the hypocrites. You must not be like them.

Don't be like the hypocrites. Now, the word for hypocrite, you may know, as I'm sure many of you will know this, that hypocrite is a Greek word. It's actually the Greek word for an actor. And that's very, very helpful because an actor is somebody who's pretending to be somebody else.

And in the Greco-Roman world, that actually very often involved putting on a mask. So if you Google Greco-Roman stage mask, you'll see examples of the actual mask that people put on.

And that's a very vivid imagery of what hypocrisy is. You're putting on an outward show that conceals who you really are and gives an impression to others that you are something else.

And in terms of our relationship with God and in terms of our walk as disciples, it's very easy to do that. It's very easy to be a hypocrite whereby we feel we need to put on this mask that looks good to others and that gains their plaudits and impresses them.

[7 : 13] So Jesus describes sounding a trumpet when you're giving, standing in the corner of the street or in the synagogue and praying an impressive long prayer or disfiguring your face while you fast.

And all of these are done to draw attention to yourself so that other people are going to be impressed. And Jesus makes it absolutely clear that that is not the kind of thing that he's looking for in his disciples.

And we have to really stop and realize how astonishing this would have been for the people listening to Jesus. Because for them, the people who sounded trumpets when they gave lavishly to charity and who made impressive prayers in the synagogue or on the streets or who were so regular and consistent in their fasting, they're the people that look like the religious elite.

They're the ones who look like they were spiritually exactly where they should be. And in terms of, if we were to use today's language of church, they would be the ones who are just absolutely, you know, at the top level of church commitment.

And yet Jesus is saying, they're hypocrites. Don't be like them. Because that kind of outward show is not what Jesus is looking for as we live out our discipleship.

[8 : 30] Now I think there's a couple of really important things to say. When we start talking about this, I think everybody in here will be able to think of examples where they've seen this in others. And this has been a constant, constant challenge for the Christian church.

It's no wonder Jesus made this the big thing that he warned about in the Sermon on the Mount. Because this is the big thing that the Christian church has struggled with. People who have maybe put on, you know, a good impression on a Sunday or in certain contexts.

And then they're a nightmare to live with. Or they're difficult at work. Or they're just very inconsistent in the way that they behave. And we've seen examples.

I'm sure all of us can see examples of that. And for some people that may be the thing that puts you off Christianity. It might be the thing that puts you off the gospel. Because you've seen.

And I've heard it so many times. Sometimes I have heard someone say that, you know, they've seen situations where they're like, well, if that's what being a Christian means, I don't want it. And I'm sure you can think of examples.

[9 : 28] So it's definitely something we see in others. The other thing that we have to acknowledge, though, and I have to acknowledge, is that I've fallen into this trap myself. Where, you know, you want to put on a good impression in front of other people.

And this is one of the hardest passages to write a sermon on. Because you're writing it thinking, I really hope this sermon's good. I really hope it'll impress everyone.

Which is exactly what Jesus is warning against. And so we're just constantly facing that pressure and that temptation. All of it's reminding us that Jesus wants us, if you're a Christian, if you become a Christian, as we live our lives as disciples of Jesus, Jesus wants us to be men and women of integrity.

And that word integrity really runs right through the whole sermon on the Mount. Jesus wants us to be integrated in the sense that what we are in private, we are in public, what we are to one person, we are to all.

And what we are before people, we are before God. We do not want to put on a false outward display. In other words, Jesus wants our discipleship to be unmasked.

[10 : 39] And Jesus brings us out very clearly with another contrast. The contrast between the secret place and the public place. All of these hypocritical acts that he identifies are done in public.

They're done to be seen by others. As you can see in these verses. That they may be seen by others. Praised by others. Seen by others. And Jesus contrasts that by saying that actually really these things should be done in secret.

You're giving, you're praying, you're fasting. They should not be broadcasted or made public. Now, focusing just a little bit more on the opening verses.

These are particularly interesting because they focus on two things that we care about a lot. Our money and our reputation. And these are massively influential on us.

Both in the public place, among colleagues or friends or in the community. And in the secret place of our hearts. And in fact, these two today in our society are very closely connected. Because our reputation is massively influenced about how much money we have and what we do with it.

[11 : 49] So money, it's money that gives you the clothes or the phone or the car or the watch or the address. That everybody can look at and think they've made it. And we live in a period of time in our culture where the connection, you just cannot break the connection between your money and your reputation.

Because if you're just in our society, if you're minted, if you're well off, you're admired. Now, it's very common nowadays. Very often, whenever you go and hear people preach across the country nowadays, you hear lots of very cultured references to films.

And so very often you'll hear people refer to great movies like The Lord of the Rings and kind of epic tales like that that are super famous, kind of Oscar-winning films.

I have a different type of taste of film. And so I've never watched The Lord of the Rings, so I can never refer to The Lord of the Rings in my sermons. Instead, my level of film is a little bit lower.

And one of my favourite films illustrates this beautifully. And that's the film Dumb and Dumber. That's the intellectual level of film that I like. And you'll remember from Dumb and Dumber that they've got this briefcase and they don't know what is in it.

[13 : 04] If you've not seen the film Dumb and Dumber, you must watch it. It's fantastic. And they've got this briefcase that they're returning to this lady. They don't know what's in it. And they travel across the country to take it to her. And then they discover that it's full of money.

And as soon as they've got money, everybody loves them. They're two characters who are not very smart and they're very much on the fringes of society.

But as soon as they've got money, everyone admires them because their culture makes that connection. Now, interestingly, in the first century, the time when Jesus gave this sermon, the connection between money and reputation is there.

But it's actually, it works in a slightly different way. Because today money shapes your reputation very much in terms of how much you have, how much you're able to get for yourself in terms of your possessions.

But in biblical times, your reputation was shaped much more by how much you were able to give. And so if you think back to the Old Testament, powerful kings like Solomon were able to give extravagant gifts to visitors.

[14:12] And all of that was just a very public display of, wow, look at how much these guys have got. And so here in the New Testament, the religious leaders are making a big spectacle of their giving, not in order to be generous, but actually to impress people.

And all of it, whether it's the flamboyant generosity of biblical times or the extravagant spending of today, the dynamic behind it's the same. It's all driven by the question, what do other people think of me?

And as disciples, we want to swap that question for another one. Instead of thinking tomorrow at work or among friends, what do other people think of me?

We need to ask, what does God think? And as we contrast those questions, what do other people think? What does God think? We need to ask ourselves, which one matters more?

So lots of contrasts for us to think about in this passage. But there's also constants. Jesus is exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders around him.

[15:12] So no interest in this mindset where you can say one thing, do another, live in one way in certain situations and be completely different than others. And he has no interest in this outward show that's not consistent with who we really are.

And the point I want to throw out here is that the hypocrisy that Jesus exposes here stands in total contrast to the constantness of God.

And the crucial point I want us to recognise is that hypocrisy and inconsistency is the absolute opposite of all that God is.

If we were to think about the question, how do we define God? We're probably asking one of the most profound questions that we could ever ask.

Defining God is a mind-blowing topic. But the amazing thing about the Bible is that if you're asking that question, how do we define God? The Bible's answer is actually very, very simple. The Bible defines God with two of the smallest words in the English language.

[16:11] The Bible defines God with the phrase, I am. You see that in Exodus 3 and it runs right through the whole of Scripture and it's a key part of Jesus' teaching as well.

And those two words are so beautiful. They're the foundation of all our theology. Because it's reminding us that God is who he is. And he is utterly consistent.

At every moment in eternity, at every moment in history, at every moment in dealing with us, God is who he is. Utterly consistent. He's unchanging. He's the same yesterday, today and forever.

He never lies. Never deceives. Never says one thing and does another. Never pretends. He's never inconsistent. In other words, God is never, ever a hypocrite.

And you must recognise that every single time you have encountered a Christian hypocrite in your life, they are misrepresenting the God that they're following.

[17:19] Because in God there is a magnificent and majestic constancy. Now, behind that lies some big theological categories.

So there's lots of big terms that theologians will use that all just captures this constantness of God. Theologians talk about divine simplicity. And what they mean by that is that in God there is just a thorough, undismantleable, unarrangeable, eternal simplicity.

He can't be broken up into smaller parts. God is God forever constant. We talk about divine immutability. That God doesn't change. He's utterly stable.

Utterly reliable. Utterly consistent. We talk about divine omniscience. That God knows all things. He sees all things. He understands all things.

And we talk about divine righteousness. That God has a standard of moral behaviour from which he never deviates. And which he always upholds. And all these massive theological categories press home the magnificent stability and constancy of the God who is who he is.

[18 : 29] And you think, no wonder Jesus says, don't be a hypocrite. And this is where it's so important that our theology becomes the lens through which we view our daily lives.

Especially our lives as disciples. So the constant unchanging truth about God needs to be the constant lens through which we look at everything in our lives.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, what I mean by that is the fact that if our theology is in the background, if it's kind of like just tucked away in there somewhere, but in the background, on a shelf, in a corner, if our theology is way back there in the back of our minds, then we can easily think that, oh, well, as long as I get my outward appearance right, all is fine.

As long as I look good at church. As long as I look good at work. As long as people see a good impression. We can actually think, that's fine. And we go chasing that. And we invest in that. And we think, that's actually where my stability and my security will lie.

But we can only think like that if our theology is way, way, way at the back of our minds. Because the minute we pull the big theological truths, the great theological truths about the constantness of God into our thinking, then our hypocrisy gets exposed.

[19 : 47] And the gospel does what it always does. It blows up our nonsense. It transforms our perspective. And it places us on a much better intellectual and ethical foundation.

Because we instantly realize that God sees everything in our lives. He knows everything in our lives. And a double life before God is impossible.

So whether it's the public place, the secret place, it makes no difference to God. He sees everything, knows everything. That is a constant.

And the fact that God sees us and knows us is not saying that God's spying on us or just watching for us to fall or make a mistake or anything like that. What it's telling us is that we cannot pretend to be something that we're not before him.

In other words, in terms of being a disciple of Jesus, what we are when no one's watching is what we really are. And that's why it's also just utter theological nonsense for us to think, you know, well, I can come to church or I can come to certain settings and be one thing.

[20 : 55] And then I can go home or I can go to work and I can be a nightmare. We cannot have a masked discipleship. It's actually theologically absurd.

Now, two warnings arise from this that are worth thinking about. And especially the points being raised here in one to four. They give us two warnings.

We have to be careful about financial showing off. This was an example of financial showing off. And that's something that we have to be careful of. There's a whole pile of pressure in life to show off financially, to think that the stuff we have, and I've done it.

I mean, I, and you still feel, you know, tempted to do it that you think, oh, I've got that. People think, oh, that's cool. And it's so easy to think like that. We want to guard against it. But more importantly, and the main point that's been made here is not so much in terms of financial showing off.

It's in terms of religious showing off. And that can happen so easily too. It can happen in churches. It can happen online in discussion forums.

[22 : 00] It can happen in books when you read people. It can happen when you're in a Bible study or talking about it. We kind of want to sort of try and flex our muscles and say and do things that we think are going to impress others.

And Jesus is reminding us that the one person who's not impressed by that is God. And we want to just make it our prayer that our biggest concern would always be for what God constantly sees.

As we've been saying, we spend a lot of time thinking about who's watching us. And we're not wrong to think about who's watching us. We're not wrong to think about the fact that someone is watching us.

The problem is that all too often we pick the wrong someone to worry about. So, contrasts, constants, and a question.

The Sermon on the Mount contains lots of direct, challenging, practical instruction. And because of that, we can often think that the Sermon on the Mount is pressing us with the question, Will you do this?

[23 : 04] So, if you go into chapter 5, just the verses before this, lots of instructions of, you know, guarding your heart against lust and against anger. Turning the other cheek when someone strikes you.

Going the extra mile when someone wants something for you. And you can find yourself, you know, asking the question, Will you do this? Will you guard your heart against lust? Will you pray for those who persecute you?

Will you go the extra mile? And these will you questions are good and important and helpful. But as we come into chapter 6, and as we look at these verses, Jesus is not so much asking the will you do this question, because he actually assumes that you're going to be giving, and that you're going to be praying, and that we're going to be fasting.

Instead, Jesus is not asking the will you do this question. Instead, he's asking the why are you doing this question. And so, if we ask the question, why are these people doing these big, impressive, outward acts that displays their religious devotion?

Why are they doing that? We might say, well, they're arrogant. They're show-offs. They're proud. They love their own status. And that's probably true in lots of ways. But I think the ultimate reason why they were doing all of these things is because they were insecure.

[24 : 21] Because exactly the same is true in all areas of life. When people show off, when people try to give a good impression, when people put a huge effort into their outward appearance or their status, whether it's talking about their jobs, salaries, whether it's making sure they wear the right clothes, car, whether it's having a good social media profile.

Why do we do these things? Is it because we're confident and strong and self-assured? I don't think it is.

I think it's almost always because we're scared and insecure. And this is where it's helpful to maybe suggest that I think you can get two kinds of hypocrisy.

So you do get arrogant hypocrisy. And, you know, you have somebody who just doesn't care about integrity, completely self-interested, quite happy with inconsistency, and is only interested in serving themselves.

From time to time, you maybe come across people like that. So you do get arrogant hypocrisy, but far more common is what we could call anxious hypocrisy.

[25 : 32] And I think that's a trap that all of us struggle to avoid falling into. There's many times I've been a hypocrite in my life.

Many times. But rarely is it because I'm an arrogant brat. But maybe times are happy. But rarely is it because of that.

Almost every time it's because I'm scared. Nervous about what people think.

And that's a great reminder that the mask of hypocrisy is not actually a public display. It's a public hiding. Because you don't want anyone to see what you're really like.

And, of course, the Bible tells us why that's the case. The insecurity that makes you and me want to hide publicly is a direct result of the effect that sin has had on humanity.

[26 : 36] You go back to Genesis 3, that's the first thing that Adam and Eve wanted to do when they realised they'd sinned. They wanted to hide. And for so many of us today, we feel that there's just this huge pressure to put on a public face that makes a good impression.

And we struggle with it all the time. I struggle with it. And you end up with a kind of double life. We can have the double life of what we are at work compared to who we really are. We can have the double life of what we are on social media compared to what we really are.

We can even have the double life of what we are at church compared with who we really are. We feel massive pressure to put on an outward mask. An outward mask that will make other people think that we're okay.

That we're doing fine. And the truth is, the whole thing is utterly exhausting. And the big thing I want you to see is that the whole thing is utterly unnecessary.

We struggle with hypocrisy because we struggle with insecurity. And the magnificent thing about the Gospel is that grace addresses both.

[27 : 42] Grace deals without hypocrisy. In fact, Jesus died to take all the consequences of my hypocrisy and yours.

So if you sit here thinking and can think at times, I have been a hypocrite. I can see that I've been a hypocrite. I can see it. The blood of Jesus has washed you clean. If you're trusting in Jesus, that hypocrisy and every other sin dealt with forever.

You're forgiven. Grace deals without hypocrisy. And grace also deals without insecurity. Because in the Gospel, God pours reassurance into us that we are his.

Because we've been talking about a masked discipleship. Here's the crucial question. When you unmask a discipleship, a disciple, what do you actually find?

So we put that mask on because we don't want people to see what we're really like. And we do not want to be unmasked in public. But if you are unmasked as a disciple of Jesus, what do you actually find?

[28 : 54] You find a child of God. You find the bride of Christ. You find the eternally redeemed.

You find someone whom God has loved forever. And as soon as we start to realise that, we think, I don't need a mask anymore.

And that's the beauty of the Gospel. That is the love and kindness and commitment and devotion that God wants to pour into every one of you.

And so we live in a world and in a society where there's massive, massive pressure to put on a mask. Many Christians have made the mistake of thinking that as Christians, we need to keep a mask on as well.

One thing that's massively true of the Gospel, as you follow Jesus, you don't need a mask. Amen.