

How Not to be Religious

Appetizer: Not conforming to the world is a familiar New Testament concept. But it is not so well known that Jesus also called us not to conform to the religious establishment. He saw (and foresaw) the worldliness of the normal church and commanded the Christian community to be truly distinct from it in life and practice.

Discussion: (1) You invited a friend to a Bible class and they declined by saying that they find all Christians to be hypocrites. What evidence is there that this is not true of the members of your group? (2) Which of your words and actions might a person find hypocritical?

Main Course: Read Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18.

1. Jesus illustrates the principle of verse 1 by focusing on three religious practices: giving, praying and fasting. What images come to mind when you read about the hypocrites in verse 2?
2. In verse 1 Jesus commands us “not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.” Yet in 5:16 he said, “Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good deeds.” Is there a contradiction here? Explain.
3. What does Jesus mean when he says, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (v. 3)? Why is this important (vv. 2, 4)?
4. In what ways can we be tempted to be hypocritical in our giving?
5. What was wrong with the way hypocrites prayed in Jesus’ day (v. 5)?
6. In what ways do hypocrites pray today?
7. Why and how is our praying to be different (v. 6)?
8. How do you think the reward the Father will give us (v. 6) differs from the reward we receive from others (v. 5)?
9. In verse 16 Jesus assumes Christians will fast (although few of us do). Why and how should we fast (vv. 16-18)?
10. Fasting was a way that people were trying to seek the approval of others. In what other areas are we tempted to seek the approval of people rather than of God? **Dessert:** How can this passage help to purify our motives?

