

Lent: A Time For Renewal of True Religion

Matthew 23:1-4

March 14,2012

Lent 4

Do you know what the word HYPOCRITE means? We sign it “hypocrite” or “two faced”. The Greek word originally meant “actor.” The word refers to someone who says one thing but does another thing; a person who looks one way on the outside but inside is completely different. Many people think the church is full of hypocrites. You have heard the joke about a person who said, “I don’t belong to a church because there are too many hypocrites there.” To which the pastor replied, “Come on in! We always have room for one more (hypocrite)”.

We laugh, but maybe we shouldn’t. Our message about true religion might make us squirm a bit – or maybe a lot – because there is a lot of false religion in churches. Who here has NOT been a hypocrite in their religion? Who here has NOT done a little acting in church? Do we have two faces – one for people to see here at church and another one to use during the week? Do we say one thing while we speak at church, but do another thing when we leave church? God calls us to leave hypocrisy for honesty; to give up false religion and practice true religion. But how do we do that?

Our lessons tonight are about false religions and a religious hypocrite. His name was CAIAPHAS (give name sign). He was the high priest of the Jewish people, the top religious person in Israel. He was very strict religiously and was responsible for leading all the important religious ceremonies in the temple. He was the head of the Jewish Council. He probably looked pretty religious.

Then Jesus appeared - traveling around preaching and teaching. Just before our lesson, Jesus did something very astounding. His friend, LAZARUS, died and was buried. Four days later, Jesus came to the tomb and made Lazarus alive! Everyone was amazed! The news about this spread through out the country.

The Jewish Council heard about this and met together to discuss this. What would they do? Here Jesus was showing Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Caiaphas and the other

members had the opportunity to show true religion and say, “Finally, the Messiah has come! We will listen to him, repent, believe in him, and worship him.”

But they didn’t do that. First of all, they hated Jesus. Jesus was making them look bad. Many people were paying attention to Jesus’ teaching and following Him. The religious leaders were losing followers. They said, “If we let Jesus continue, everyone will believe in Him.” They didn’t want that.

Secondly, they were afraid. Perhaps many people would follow Jesus and revolt against the Roman government. Then the Roman soldiers would come and destroy their temple and nation. They would lose their jobs, their wealth, and maybe their lives. And they certainly didn’t want that, either.

So, what do they do? Caiaphas gives them the answer. He says, “One man (Jesus) dying for the people - that is better than all the people dying.” And from that day on, the Jewish Council plotted to kill Jesus. These religious men led by the religious Caiaphas would kill an innocent man to protect themselves. When they arrested Jesus, they had a trial and what a hypocritical trial it was. They could not find witnesses to prove Jesus had done wrong. So, they brought in people to lie about Jesus. But even the liars couldn’t agree. Finally, Caiaphas stands up and says, “Are you the Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus answers, “Yes, I am.” Does Caiaphas bow before him and worship? No. He says, “He has spoken blasphemy.” And all the Council says, “He must die”. And then these fine religious men spit on him, beat him, and send him off to die.

In the past, Jesus had criticized these phony religious leaders because of their hypocrisy. In the text for the sermon, Jesus said, “The religious leaders have authority from Moses. You must do what they say, but don’t imitate their actions. They do not practice what they preach. They make up heavy loads – hard things to do - and give them to people, but they are not willing to help them a little bit to move them.” The religious leaders studied the Bible and found 613 laws for the people to obey. They invented many more rules for them to follow. The religious leaders emphasized obeying all these rules and laws. If the people wanted to be truly religious, they must look good and be(have) good. Yet the people could not follow all those rules and laws. The religious leaders looked down

on them for that and felt much superior to them. And, when Jesus, the Savior of the World came to help, the religious leaders complained because Jesus wasn't "religious". He didn't associate with the "good" people. Jesus accepted sinners and associated with them. Instead of rejoicing because of His love, the religious leaders hated Jesus for His kindness and planned to kill Him for that. What hypocrites!

But aren't we likewise hypocritical? We, too, think that "religious" means looking good and being good. We may feel very proud because we attend church often and are critical of people who don't attend church. We may feel even more superior now because we are coming to church on a Wednesday -- twice in one week. We may wear good clothes for church and are critical of people wearing old dirty clothes. We try to behave religiously in church and may become disgusted over other people's behavior. When we hear the story about Jesus and His great love, we may think, "That's right! Jesus loves me. After all, I am a good person, well-dressed, well-behaved, active Christian." We may feel that the church is for "good" people. But those other people - the people that are not "good" people - we may look down on, criticize, and reject. We feel so much better than they are. What hypocrites we are!

If we think following God means trying to be good and obey all the rules and laws, two things may happen. First, you may feel you *have* obeyed all of God's rules and laws and you become proud and hypocritical. You may make mistakes, but you hide them or make excuses for them.

Or, secondly, you may try and try to do good and, no matter how hard you try, you just can't do good all the time. You may rebel against the rules and do wrong. But then you feel worse. If God only accepts "good" people and you are not "good", you despair. If you are phony and hypocritical, God has no help for you. However, if you have tried and tried to do good but admit your failure, God offers help.

Jesus came into this world to change the meaning of religious. Jesus showed that the meaning of religion is not to be *good*, but to be *forgiven*. That is the reason Jesus associated with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. They needed forgiveness. Jesus did not teach them rules

and laws to obey, but Jesus taught God's love and forgiveness. Those people gladly listened. The "holier than thou" religious leaders were sinners, too, but they didn't want forgiveness. So they ignored Jesus' teaching.

But Jesus did more than *teach* about forgiveness. Jesus also *earned* forgiveness. Caiaphas had said, "Jesus dying for the people - that is better than all the people dying." Caiaphas meant that they should murder Jesus to save their jobs, their temple, and themselves. Nevertheless, His words were true. Jesus dying for people -- that is better than all people dying. God agreed with that. God has to punish every sin. All of us have sin - pride and hypocrisy - but He did not want to punish all of us. He loved us and felt it was better to punish One Person - His own Son- instead of us. It was better for Jesus to die and suffer hell, than for all of us to die go to hell.

Jesus was willing to accept this job. The religious leaders made up heavy loads - rules and laws - and gave them to the people to obey, but did not help them. Jesus accepted those loads. He obeyed God's law for us. And all of our mistakes, bad behavior and sin - He took upon Himself. He went to the cross and accepted all of God's punishment for us. He died for us so that we don't have to die eternally. He overcame death and became alive so that we who have been forgiven might also overcome death and live forever.

Lent is a good time to renew our understanding about religion. Religion does not mean following rules, obeying laws, and trying to be good so we can feel superior to other people and close to God. That is false religion. True religion is admitting that we have not followed His rules, not obeyed His laws, and that we are not good. True religion is trusting in Jesus for forgiveness, not trusting in ourselves and our goodness.

Having been forgiven, true religion means we change our attitude to other people. We won't feel so superior to people who don't come to church or come only occasionally and people who don't dress so nicely. We will not ignore people who are not like us or reject people needing help because they bother us. Why? Because we are all sinners. We all need forgiveness. And we all have

forgiveness through Jesus Christ - His life of holiness, His suffering and death on a cross, and His resurrection to life.

Having that forgiveness means we reach out in love – here in church and out in the world. We will show compassion and help other people – our people in church and those people out there who may annoy us and make us feel uncomfortable. We will be humble servants and not arrogant “religious” folk.

Sometimes people use the word “religious” as an insult. “She’s so religious!” Religion has a bad meaning. It may mean the person is so proud and feels better than others. But it is a misunderstanding of religious. If someone says to you, “You are so religious”, may it have a good meaning -- the person notices that you are a humble sinner, accepting of Jesus forgiveness, and willing to be patient, forgiving and serving others. That’s true religion! Amen.