

BUILDING INTEGRITY

A Prep Guide for Session Four of a Scholarly Stroll

Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton

“Perfect Peasants?!” (Nosy Nahum, Page Six Column, *The Sepphoris Sun*)

More heads are turning toward our Galilee, dear reader, and they aren't all happy heads. Jesus, the upstart ambler from over the western hill, has once again raised a ruckus – this time by proclaiming to the unwashed masses that they ought to be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”. Scholars are fuming; aristocrats are snorting; rabbis are raging; but the *hoi polloi* are flocking. While opponents mutter the ancient adage, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?!” , outcasts stream down the hillside with renewed hope for a future. There is surely more to come from this baffling bearded bumpkin, and, as ever, I will keep you on the inside.

The Anatomy of Hypocrisy

Jon Stewart made his name as the host of Comedy Central's “The Daily Show” by putting politicians in the unenviable position of having their words and their deeds (or even their words spoken in one place and their words spoken in another) juxtaposed on a nationally televised split screen, before God and everyone. It changed the way news gets reported, and it spotlighted hypocrisy.

Free-associate for a moment with the word “hypocrites.” Do pleasant thoughts roll forth when you hear those beautiful syllables? Of course they don't. Hypocrites are the people we love to hate. They're the blowhards, the two-faced scoundrels, the can't-walk-their-talk phonies.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes two distinct sorts of hypocrite.

For one kind of hypocrite – we'll call it H1 – no good deed goes unpublicized. George Castanza sticks a tip in the jar at the deli counter, but then realizes no one has noticed; so he tries to sneak his dollar back out of the jar, and gets caught “stealing.” Most hypocrites are more accomplished at their public displays, but all of them produce their show for prime time viewing.

There's a second breed of hypocrite (H2): the kind who says one thing and does another. These are the poor souls John Stewart routinely catches on a split screen: Newt Gingrich leads the righteous drive to impeach Bill Clinton for an affair, while keeping a mistress. Elliot Spitzer vigorously prosecutes prostitution in the limelight while quietly paying for sex in the shadows. Al Gore produces “An Inconvenient Truth” to sound the alarm about climate change, but during the year of its release consumes twenty times more power than the national average in his Tennessee home. One [scientific study](#) of Hypocrisy 2 lists several common and loathed

examples: “pedophile priests, sex -offender feminists, and seemingly very busy dispensable office workers.”

We can sense viscerally from our experience why even Jesus hated hypocrisy. Right here in Matthew 6 he chastises those who do good deeds “to be seen by others.” Showiness = H1.

And he saved his very harshest words for the “lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matthew 23) – called them whitewashed pigsties and bleached tombs. Why? Because “they know Moses’ Law... but don’t dare follow the lead of their lives.” Two Faces = H2.

In his classic novel called *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis characterizes this everyday stretching of the truth:

“You love to look earnest and inform the world that it’s the ‘duty of responsible business men to be strictly moral as an example to the community.’ In fact you’re so earnest about morality, old Georgie, that I hate to think how essentially immoral you must be underneath.”

With Lewis, we love to hate hypocrites, whether H1 or H2. We cheer their downfall with a gleeful Schadenfreude. But let’s slow down for just a minute, before our pointed finger of righteousness pokes us in the eye. A famous recent study found that every day people like us stretch the truth about 15% of the time – most often to make ourselves seem better than we are. ([Dan Ariely, The Honest Truth about \(Dis\)Honesty: How We Lie to Everyone – Especially Ourselves](#)) Jesus’s words here call us to track back to the last time we airbrushed our own photo or held others to a higher standard than our life can sustain. (For me, it was earlier this afternoon.) Bad news: suddenly Jesus is using the H word about us!

But here’s good news. Jesus still hates hypocrisy – can’t stand it! But he loves hypocrites. In fact, he loves hypocrites so much that at the end of this Book of Matthew he’s going to hang on a tree for them. Which is a good thing, because I’m one. And so are you. Let’s listen to Jesus

Alms

Alms giving laces its way through Torah as a sort of red thread. It arrives in different forms, always focused on care for the neediest in the community. Here’s how Kaufman Kohler summarizes in the Jewish Encyclopedia:

“[Alms is] a word derived from the Greek ἐλεημοσύνη / ELEAYMOSUNAY (mercifulness), used by Greek-speaking Jews to denote almost exclusively the offering of charity to the needy, from a feeling of both compassion and righteousness (zēdaḳah). Specific manifestations of the mandate range from gleanings in the field (Leviticus 19.9-10)

through Deuteronomy's more general "You shall open your hand wide to your brother or sister, to your poor, and to your needy, in your land" (Deut. 15.11)

Almsgiving was variously motivated, even, in later periods, by the hope of having one's sins forgiven by God. Daniel himself challenges the great King Nebuchadnezzar to expiate his own sins by assisting the oppressed in his Kingdom.

"Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged." (Daniel 4.27)

Surely ancient Jews, like every generation everywhere, were variously motivated and variously active in alms-giving. Jesus targets one of these, the motivation to "be seen by people", which he sees falling short of the alms giver's ultimate quest for connection with God.

Prayer

The specific prayer practices of leaders and everyday practitioners of Judaism during Jesus's time are a bit difficult to suss out, because the tradition of Jewish prayer was given its lasting structure in the years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. It was a natural response to the discontinuation of Temple prayer practices, and it made the prayer of Jews portable in new ways. However, given the widespread need for practices that could be employed in synagogues and households of the Jewish diaspora (the geographical spreading of the Jewish population beyond Palestine, most scholars believe that the basic substance that became normative in the post-second-temple period had their roots in the decades prior to the destruction – including the very time when Jesus taught.

[Here](#) is a brief summary of the structure:

"Their liturgy consisted of three primary corpuses: (1) the twice-daily recitation of the Shema—the central statement of Jewish monotheistic belief—and the formulaic blessings (berakhot) recited before and after it; (2) "The Prayer" of 18 blessings, also known as the Amidah—recited several times daily, and (3) the public recitation of the Torah in installments."

As for frequency, devout Jews of Jesus's time would have had three canonical hours daily – morning (shacharit), noon (mincha), and nightfall (arvit) – which coincide with the three main times of sacrifice in the Temple of Jesus's time.

The practices could be solo or in a group, as [this author](#) explains:

"Jews who choose to pray three times a day might do so alone, or in the context of a minyan—a quorum of ten individuals whose gathering constitutes a community, and

allows for the recitation of additional prayers which cannot be recited alone, including the kaddish, or the prayer for the dead.”

Jesus seems to have in mind “the minyan” described here – the prayer when gathered – although solo prayers might very well take their piety into the public sphere and do it ostentatiously.

Fasting

Fasting was practiced throughout Israel’s history and into all eras of Judaism. In the period of the Hebrew Bible, fasting was an emergency remedy, called for only by crisis or disaster. But later, in the centuries leading to and surrounding Jesus’s Sermon, abstaining from food attained a ritual rhythm.. [One author](#) describes the practices as follows:

“During the Second Temple period (500 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.), daily or biweekly fastings were practiced for reasons of asceticism, especially among women (Judith 8:6; Luke 2:37; TJ, Ḥag 2:2, 77d), but also among men (Luke 18:12; Mark 2:18), or in preparation for an apocalyptic revelation (Dan. 10:3, 12; ii Bar. 12:5; 20:5–21:1; 43:3; iv Ezra 5:13–20; 6:35; Sanh. 65b; TJ, Kil. 9:4, 32b). The Jewish literature of the Second Temple period also advocates fasting as a way of atonement for sins committed either unintentionally (Ps. of Sol. 3:9) or even deliberately (Test. Patr., Sim. 3:4), or to prevent them (ibid., Joseph 3:4; 4:8; 10:1–2).”

These “daily or biweekly” fastings described here would not have been universally practiced, but four annual fasts would have continued.

As early as 540 B.C.E., a prophet from Isaiah’s tradition launched a criticism of the way observant Jews were fasting. Isaiah reports the people’s complaint:

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Then he offers God’s answer back to the complainants:

“Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day
and oppress all your workers.
You fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.”

Most pertinent to Jesus’s sermon, Isaiah (Matthew’s Jesus’s favorite prophet) channels God’s voice to correct showy suffering:

Is such the fast that I choose,
 a day to humble oneself?
 Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
 and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
 Will you call this a fast,
 a day acceptable to the Lord?

The prophet's answer is a resounding "No! Isaiah's voice of God offers the ideal form of fasting:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
 to loose the bonds of injustice,
 to undo the straps of the yoke,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 and to break every yoke?
 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
 and bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover them
 and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

This joining of fasting with alms, along with the histrionics of those who "lie in sackcloth and ashes" to draw attention to their own righteousness – these moments from Isaiah 58 clearly inform our reading of Matthew 6.1 - 18.

The Lord's Prayer

In his teaching on prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus spoke words that most every Christian across the ages has known by heart. We will look briefly at the Lord's Prayer in our gathering Monday evening but spend most of our time on the practices in which Jesus targets hypocrisy.

Resources

The hotlinks in this prep guide provide a good entryway to the material we'll read together. Here they are again, for your convenience. I will share additional scholarly resources on this section of the sermon as we gather Monday evening.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016726812300152X>

https://www.google.com/search?q=dan+ariely+the+honest+truth+about+dishonesty+summary&oq=Dan+Ariely+The+Honest+&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBwgAEAAyGAAQyBwgAEAAyGAAQyBggBEEUYOTIHCAIQLhiABDIICAMQABgWGB4yCAgEEAAyFhgeMggIBRAAGBYHjIICAYQABgWGB7SAQg3Mjk1ajBqN6gCALACAA&source=chrome&ie=UTF-8

https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1295_-alms

https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/history_of-jewish-prayer/

https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/fasting_and-fast-days

Our Class Reading Schedule

05JAN26	Blessed	Matthew 5.1 - 16
12JAN26	Deepening Torah	Matthew 5.17 - 30
19JAN26	Chasing Perfection	Matthew 5.31 - 48
26JAN26	Building Integrity	Matthew 6.1 - 18
02FEB26	Non-Anxious Presents	Matthew 6.19 - 34
09FEB26	The Gold Standard	Matthew 7.1 - 11
16FEB26	Discerning the Voices	Matthew 7.12 - 23
23FEB26	Solid Ground	Matthew 7.24 - 29