

## STOP ACTING AND LIVE!

When you think of a great actor or actress, who comes to mind: Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Stewart, Betty Davis, Orson Wells, Anthony Hopkins, Meryl Streep, Morgan Freeman, Mark Wahlberg, Sean Connery, or Tom Selleck? How many here have ever pictured themselves in a Walter Mitty moment as an actor or actress? Who wants to be a hypocrite? The root word for hypocrite comes from the Greek theater. It means to be an actor or actress. The word “hypocrite” literally means to “pretend to be someone whom he really are not”. An actor pretends to be someone he or she is not. In the setting of the Christian faith, a hypocrite is one who pretends to be a Christian, who acts and talks like a Christian, but in his heart he is really not a Christian at all!

In Isaiah 58:3 the Israelites are condemned for their act of hypocrisy. They pretended to be true followers of God, but their hypocrisy was exposed in their religious fasting. By fasting they gave others the impression that they were very pious, devout believers. They felt that because they fasted God should take special note and bless them. In fact, they complained that God had neither seen their great acts of piety and worship nor did He recognize their act of humility by their fast. “Where are God’s blessings?” they complained. Didn’t their fasting do any good? Was it a waste of time and effort?

Today, people can be tempted to be religious actors or hypocrites, too. They pretend to be religious by attending worship, they are often seen in prayer; they keep religious traditions faithfully, fulfill all the customs, and recite all the rituals. They might even fast on a regular basis. Yet their motive is not to thank for God for His grace! They feel that God must notice their performance and reward them, even though their actions are just an act! They think that God owes them! STOP ACTING AND LIVE the Christian faith!

Do any of you ever fast? Do you know that there is only one time in Scripture when God’s Word commands people to fast? And in fact, because of the work of Jesus, that command no longer applies to you and me today! The Israelites were commanded to “**afflict of one’s soul from morning to evening or deny yourselves**”, i.e., fast, only on the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 16:29) And as Paul tells us Colossians 2:16ff, “**Therefore do not let anyone judge you with regard to a religious festival...these are a foreshadow of the things that were to come ; the reality, however, is found in Christ.**” In other words, there is no need to celebrate the Day of Atonement. Through Jesus’ shedding of His blood on the Cross, His sacrificing Himself for our sins, Jesus fulfilled our need to observe and fast on the Day of Atonement. Jesus’ blood made atonement for our sins and the sins of all people once for all time. We are already forgiven! No need to fast! STOP ACTING AND LIVE the Christian faith!

There are other times that people may choose to fast. Perhaps you yourself like to fast. Keep two things in mind: **one**, it is wrong to give the impression that others who do not fast are either less a Christian than you or sin by their not participation. And **two**, don’t confuse fasting with dieting. Throughout history the Jews and Christians have chosen to fast as a sign of sorrow or repentance; in time of war, sickness, impending danger, drought; or commemorating a calamity. And people might fast as a form of political or social protest. Whenever you may fast, do not be hypocritical in your fasting. Don’t think this makes you special with God.

Look at how the Israelites' hypocrisy was revealed in Isaiah 58:3-4. While they fasted, they continued to do as they sinfully pleased. As they tried to draw God's attention and praises through their fasting, they simultaneously exploited others, quarreled with others, and even became violent towards others. That would be like people today attending worship, bellowing out the liturgy, quoting Scriptures most eloquently in Bible class, and yet in their private lives fill their hearts with lust, harbor feelings of prejudice and hatred towards others, steal from their employer, swindle others out of their money, and exploit their clients or competition. I know of a case where one pious elder pompously read the lessons in worship and helped serve communion all the while he tried to cheat his siblings out of their rightful share of their parents' inheritance. What is amazingly ironic is that those who act this way actually believe that their participation in rituals and traditional ceremonies earns them God's special attention, praises, and rewards.

Some folks, when they fast, act in such a normal way that you would never know that they have denied themselves eating food for hours and sometimes days. They remain happy, joyful, and energetic. They keep it a secret and no one but God and them knows about the fast. But others, when they fast do so with a long, sad face. They can't wait to tell others, "I'm fasting." It usually results in a complimentary word like, "Boy, are you religious!" or "Good for you. You must have a strong faith!" (I recall a famous actress doing a hunger strike in Denver to draw attention to the cause of American Indians. T.V. cameras gave her great publicity! Yet the hotel chef told me, "You should see the size of the room service orders we send up to her!") In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus warns against drawing the attention of others when we fast. Hypocrites do that to draw attention and praise. Those words of recognition will be all the reward they will ever get! Jesus tells us that if we fast, do it in a way that no one else knows you're fasting. God will reward us later and in secret. **STOP ACTING AND LIVE!** Let's put away our hypocrisy!

One day the great 19<sup>th</sup> century British preacher, the Rev. Dr. Charles Spurgeon asked his friend why he did not belong to any Christian congregation. His friend retorted, "I don't want to join a congregation because they are full hypocrites." To which Spurgeon replied, "Well, when you find the perfect church, don't join it or you will spoil it!"

We must still be careful and resist the temptation to judge others for their forms of hypocrisy. We are all subject to temptation to see ourselves more highly than we are by how we act in worship or by the things we do in or for the church rather than in how well we live God's teachings in our daily lives. We can be tempted to think that our fasting, or anything thing else that we do in the ministries, that our involvement, our doing extra things, even our being a professional church worker somehow qualifies us for special recognition, privileges, or blessing from God. Whenever you catch yourself in a mindset of hypocrisy, remember three things: **one**: we are only doing our duty as God has commanded; **two**: whatever we do, we do it out of thankfulness for God's love and forgiveness given to us graciously through the death and resurrection of Jesus; and **three**: God will forgive us for our sins of hypocrisy when we truly repent!

Now if acting or going through the motions of being religious, including fasting, do not please God when at the same time our daily attitudes and actions say something entirely opposite, what actions then do please our LORD? Look at verse six: justice, the proper use of freedom especially in freeing others, giving food to the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, clothes for the poor and needy, and

caring for our own family members. These actions please our LORD! In other words, reflecting the love and life of Jesus in our actions towards others. If you think following rituals, traditions, and even fasting makes you important to God and yet remain blind to the needs of others, go over to the Eastern Shore and stick your foot in Atlantic Ocean and see how high it rises! Do things purely out of thankfulness and God will smile on you!

The closing verses of our text promise us that when we STOP ACTING like we are religious AND LIVE the Christian faith God will give three special types of blessings to those who repent and turn away from a life of hypocrisy. God promises blessings in this life. God promises us blessings in eternity. And, as our text promises at the end of verse nine, **“Then you will call and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help and the LORD will say: ‘Here am I.’”**

Brothers and sisters, now is the time to STOP ACTING AND LIVE! In Jesus' name, amen.