

Our reputations, our character, how others view us, can sometimes affect how we live out our lives. There are countless people in this world who devote most of their time and energy into getting others to like them, to pay attention to them, and if they make others happy then they begin to believe that they are happy as well. We typically call these individuals; people pleasers, approval seekers, or co-dependents.

Some of us may even know people who are like this. Maybe we have a friend or a relative who falls into this category, or if we are brave enough to admit it, perhaps we might say that we belong to this group as well. Which begs the question, why do we care so much about what others think of us?

I think that from a very early age we begin to understand that our actions can affect how others view and treat us! In an article called *People Pleasing and Love Addiction* an author and counselor named George Hartwell writes, “People Pleasing is a powerful web of childhood experiences, beliefs, and painful feelings that result in a strategy to gain love, security, belonging, and a safe home base. With such a firm foundation in the experiences of childhood this choice, this mindset of earning love becomes solid as rock and impossible to stop.” He goes on to say, “Based on this perception of life that one's caretakers are not going to provide unconditional love, a child devises people pleasing strategies to earn love. These earning love strategies might include: perfectionism, doing what is right, always being good, never giving offense, not expressing anger, working hard, and seeking measurable achievement.”

Now, not only do we learn this way of life when we are little children, but many of us grow up thinking that our reputations define who we are. In high school how many of us wanted to at one time, or another, to belong to the popular crowd? How many of us wanted to be recognized by our classmates as being liked, respected, and maybe even feared to some degree? As we got older we received

certain types of recognition that fed into our need of acceptance. We were given awards in school, trophies for competing in sporting events, sometimes we even received special titles like “Student of the Month, or Employee of the Month,” for a job well done!

This desire to be recognized, and rewarded for our accomplishments, is all around us with celebrity events like the Golden Globes, the Academy Awards, the Emmys, and the list goes on. Please don’t think that I am saying that any of these things are bad, because they aren’t! What I’m trying to get at, is that sometimes we measure our greatness by how the world views us, sometimes we want to please others so badly that we forget what truly matters! Rewards and recognition from our friends, families, and our neighbors, is great, but wouldn’t we much rather live lives that are pleasing to God and receive our rewards from him?

In our Gospel story I believe, that this is the lesson that Jesus is trying to teach the Pharisees, his newly called disciples, and us! Getting ahead in life is not necessarily about trying to make a good first impression, and then backing up this impression with credible behavior. Through Christ, God turns this all upside down.

God will love and accept us, to be sure, but it has nothing to do with favorable impressions. If that was the case, were it simply a matter of impressions, God would’ve been through with us a long time ago. Yet, God loves us unconditionally, and continually seeks to be in relationship with us. In fact, He sent His Son into our world to restore and heal a relationship with us that had been broken through our sinful human nature.

As Jesus preaches to the crowd about praying, tithing, and fasting, he, is emphatic about the futility of trying to impress God by impressing men. Pay special attention to his words as he says, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues, whenever you pray go into

your room and shut the door, and whenever you fast, do not show others you are fasting...”

Our sinful nature is so subtle that it can defile even a good thing like sharing with the poor. If our motives are to get praise from others, then like the Pharisees we will call attention to what we are doing. We will let everyone around us know just how great we are, by letting them know we were willing to give up some of our hard-earned money to someone in need. But if our motive is to serve God in love, and to please Him, then we will give our gifts without calling attention to them.

We will do so in response to what God has given us, and done for us, not because we expect anything in return. As a result, we will grow spiritually; God will be glorified; and others will be helped. But if we give with the wrong motive, we rob ourselves of certain blessings, and rewards, and rob God of glory, even though the money we share might help a needy person.

Our sinful nature is often so subtle that we may pray often in front of others, causing them to think that we practice prayer regularly as a daily walk with God, when perhaps we only do it in public with others around. Rather than making our individual prayers a personal matter between us and God, we can become like the Jewish leaders turning our pious conversations with God into an act to be seen by men, in order to demonstrate our supposed righteousness. In our story this evening, Jesus wants us to understand that when we do this our prayers are not necessarily directed to God, but actually to those around us.

We may even think that perhaps we can influence those listening in on our conversations with God in some way, or that what we say might even change them in a manner of speaking. Opposite of this is taking the time to pray privately to God! In the Gospels we witness Jesus doing this very thing, as he would often go off to a secluded location to talk with his heavenly father. When we do this, we are

provided with a unique opportunity to hand over to God all of our concerns and our worries, without being concerned with what others might think of us, and we are also granted time and the opportunity to listen to our creator and redeemer.

Jesus goes on to teach us that our sinful nature can also cause us to observe other religious disciplines for the wrong reasons. For instance, we may fast or refrain from enjoying certain earthly pleasures so that others think we are spiritual. Since today is Ash Wednesday I kind of wonder how many of us have decided to give up something during Lent? Perhaps we have chosen to stop playing video games or are taking a bit of a break from Social Media? Maybe we have given up a favorite food or drink such as sugar or beer? Perhaps we will avoid watching movies, or we will abstain from participating in a favorite daily activity that we look forward to? If and when we do give up things during Lent, do we tell others about the sacrifice we are making, or do we keep it between ourselves and God?

I remember a few years ago I decided to give up meat for Lent. A really good friend of mine was a vegetarian, and I can recall all of the praise I received from him when I made that decision. Oftentimes I would call him up, and tell him how hard it was for me to avoid eating meat after I went to the mall and smelled the Terriyaki in the food court, or witnessed a friend eating a juicy hamburger at lunch. As I look back, I wonder if I gave up meat to help me grow closer to God, and to learn to rely on God during my cravings, or if I just did it to impress my friend? Although the purpose of fasting is to emphasize the denial of the flesh, we can become like the Pharisees who glorified their flesh by drawing attention to themselves, if we do it for the wrong reasons.

As Christians if we live our lives with the sole purpose of trying to please others, or ourselves, then aren't we in some degree being hypocritical. As disciples we are called to live our lives in response to what Jesus has done for us, in response to the grace that God has poured out upon us through the cross. And as

we walk with Jesus to the cross during lent, we must try to remember that hypocrisy can rob us of finding true joy in our Christian living. When we fall into it; we substitute reputation for character, mere words for true prayer, and money for the devotion of the heart.

No wonder Jesus compared the Pharisees to tombs that were whitewashed on the outside, but filthy on the inside! But hypocrisy not only robs us of our character, it can also rob us of our spiritual rewards. Instead of an eternal approval of God, we receive the shallow praise of men. We pray, but there are no answers. We fast, but our inner selves show no improvement. Our spiritual lives can become hollow and lifeless, we begin to reflect the dust that we were created out of, we become the ash that is drawn upon our foreheads. When we focus on pleasing others and forget about God's grace, and how we are to respond to that grace, we miss the blessing of God here and now, and also lose the reward of God when Christ returns.

The first step toward overcoming hypocrisy and people pleasing, is to be honest with God in our secret life. Our motive must be to please God alone, no matter what others say or do, or think of us. It has well been said "The most important part of a Christian's life is the part that only God sees." When our reputations become more important than our character, we have in one way or another become hypocrites.

The impression that should matter the most to us is the Cross-Impression, an impression made by Christ alone. So take a hard look at the ashes on your forehead, or imagine you have a blackened cakey cross drawn on your brow. How good can we actually look wearing ashes? Actually.....it doesn't matter, and that's the point. Ashes are a great place from which to arise, reminding us that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return. And they can also help us remember that we

are called to serve humbly our God who loves us and gave His son for us. Thanks
be to God. Amen