Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter… SIX. That’s right… we’ve actually made it to the second chapter of the Sermon on the Mount! For those of you who have just started coming to this church in the past 15 weeks, you were probably starting to wonder, “Does that guy ever preach about anything other than Matthew 5?” The answer is yes. Today is the day that we start Matthew 6. And we’re going to look at verses 1-18 today. The reason I want us to take these 18 verses together is because they’re tied together by one major truth that Jesus teaches. And He doesn’t waste any time telling us what that truth is. He tells us in the very first verse. Look at Matthew 6:1 with me. Jesus says, *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”*

 Now make sure you notice how perfectly this fits with what Jesus has said so far in the Sermon on the Mount. He started off by telling us that the only way we can be righteous is if we acknowledge our spiritual poverty and mourn over our sin and meekly turn to God and hunger for God’s righteousness. That’s when God fills us with righteousness. Next, Jesus said that our righteousness has to surpass the Pharisees and teachers of the law if we hope to get into the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus gave example after example to emphasize that real righteousness doesn’t just mean that you behave a certain way on the outside. Real righteousness means that you become a certain type of person on the inside. You become more and more like God as He fills you with His righteousness. And now Jesus tells us that when we start to live out that righteousness by doing righteous acts, if we are truly righteous, we won’t do those things in order to be seen by men and honored by them. And in verses 2-18, Jesus gives us three examples to show us what He means. The first example is in verses 2-4. Jesus says, *"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”*

The second example is in verses 5-6. Jesus says, *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”*

Now, Jesus also includes some additional teaching about prayer in verses 7-15, and we’re going to look at that next week. But for now, the third example Jesus gives is in verses 16-18. Jesus says, *"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”*

Now, notice that Jesus says almost the exact same thing in each of those examples. He warns us not to do these things in order to be seen by men and honored by them, because that makes us hypocrites and we will have received our reward in full. Instead, if we do the right things for the right reasons, God notices and rewards us.

And really, Jesus’ main emphasis in this text is the same thing we saw over and over again in chapter 5: Jesus is monumentally concerned with your heart. Jesus says that what you do is not nearly as important as why you do it. Are you doing it for God, or are you doing it for men?

The other thing to notice about our text is that every example Jesus gives is something that we generally consider to be a very good thing. Every example Jesus gives is a religious activity that we would tell people they should do. Giving, praying, fasting… those are all things that we encourage people to do, and those are all things that we consider indicators of righteousness. But in our text today, Jesus says, “Not necessarily.” Jesus says that you could do every one of those things and be a completely unrighteous hypocrite. Jesus is telling us that religious activities, by themselves, do not make us righteous. And it is crucial for us to hear that, because here’s the thing: Most of us are here at church because we are religious people, and that means most of us practice a lot of religious activities regularly. We pray, we read our Bible, we come to worship, we attend Bible studies, we tithe, we serve in the church, we witness. And those are all good things. Jesus never says you shouldn’t do those things. In fact, He assumes you will, and He gives instructions on how to do them the right way. But Jesus doesn’t assume that just because you’re doing those religious activities that you are really righteous. And that is the great danger for us. That is the mistake we’re constantly tempted to make. We’re tempted to measure our righteousness by the religious activities we do, and we’re tempted to think that as long as we do those religious activities, that proves we’re righteous.

And Jesus absolutely blows that assumption out of the water with His teaching today. He says, “Yes, righteous people give and pray and fast. But so do hypocrites.” And, it’s usually the hypocrites who look the best doing it, because that’s all they’re concerned about. So if we measure our righteousness by the religious things we do, and especially if we measure our righteousness by how impressive we are when we do them, we have totally missed the truth Jesus teaches about righteousness.

In fact, we will have missed the foundational truth of Christianity: Our righteousness is found in Jesus Christ alone. Because of your sin, nothing you can do will ever be good enough to make you right with God. You have fallen short of the glory of God, and you can’t live up to His standards. No amount of giving and praying and fasting and Bible reading and church attendance is ever going to make you right with God. Please know that. The reason for giving to this church is not so you can buy God’s approval. You can’t. The reason for praying and reading your Bible and attending faithfully and serving is not so you can impress God and convince Him you’re good enough. You’re not. And as long as you’re doing those things because you think they’ll make you righteous, you are a religious hypocrite who has not yet seen your desperate need for Jesus. So, if you measure your righteousness by religious activities, you have missed the truth of the gospel. Your righteousness is found only in Jesus Christ.

Now again, please don’t misunderstand me. Jesus is not saying that religious activities are a bad thing. He’s not saying that giving and praying and fasting makes you unrighteous. In fact, He’s saying that if you’re righteous, you *will* do those things. Jesus is simply saying that the how and the why of your religious activities is even more important than the what.

It reminds me of something that used to happen at the end of basketball practice in high school. At the end of practice, the coaches would have us divide up at the different goals in the gym and tell us we each had to shoot 50 free throws before we could leave. And then the coaches would go on into their offices and leave us. Now, it was the end of practice. We were usually tired and hungry and ready to go home. And the faster we shot those free throws, the faster we could leave. So some people would rush through them and have terrible form and miss half the free throws. Other people would take their time and practice good form and make as many as they could. Everybody did the activity. We all shot 50 free throws. What we did was not the difference. How we did it and why we did it was the difference. We could do it as fast as we could just to meet the requirement, and in the process actually makes ourselves worse as players. Or we could do it as well as we could, because we knew it was worthwhile and we honestly wanted to get better.

That’s exactly what Jesus is saying about our religious activities. Just doing religious things doesn’t make you righteous. If you do them in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons, that actually reveals that you aren’t righteous. On the other hand, when Jesus truly makes you righteous, the result won’t just be that you do religious things. The result will be that you do them in the right way and for the right reasons.

And like I said, this truth hits us right where we are. At this very moment, we’re engaging in a religious activity, so we need to make sure our hearts reflect the truth of Jesus’ teaching. And really, Jesus gives us one major truth here. He gives us one big, overarching warning. Jesus says, “If you do righteous acts without a righteous heart, you’re just a religious hypocrite.” If you do righteous acts without a righteous heart, you’re just a religious hypocrite.

So if we’re going to live out Jesus’ teaching, we have to guard our hearts against hypocrisy. We have to be ruthless in our battle against hypocrisy, because hypocrisy is a constant danger for religious people. Now, something you may not know is that our English word hypocrisy comes directly from the Greek word *hupokrisis*. And what’s really interesting is that originally the word *hupokrisis* was used to describe the performance of an actor or actress. It meant to play a role on stage. In other words, to be a hypocrite was to act. And that gives us great insight into what hypocrisy really is. Hypocrisy is when the way you act on the outside doesn’t match who you are on the inside. Hypocrisy is when you create a public impression that doesn’t match who you really are. It’s a public appearance that is inconsistent with the internal reality of your heart. And you can see why that’s such a danger when it comes to religious activities. Religious activities are the outer behaviors that people can easily see. We can act out our religious role and put up this façade of righteousness and that will be enough to convince a lot of people that we really are righteous, because that’s all they can see. But it’s not enough for God. In 1 Samuel 16:7, the Bible tells us that man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. And that means just the outer religious activities aren’t enough for God. God looks past those things and into your heart. God wants more than just righteous acts. He wants a righteous heart. That’s why it’s so crucial that you come to Jesus Christ and trust His grace and allow Him to change your heart… Because that’s what God is looking at. God looks at your heart, and if your heart doesn’t match your actions, then your heart will condemn you as a hypocrite. So we have to beware of hypocrisy.

With that said, let’s look at the examples of hypocrisy that Jesus mentions. Jesus says that hypocrites are people who give to the needy and announce it with trumpets. In other words, they draw attention to the fact that they’re being generous. Jesus also says hypocrites are people who pray in public places so that others will see them. And Jesus says hypocrites are people who fast and go out of their way to look like they’re afflicted and suffering, because they want people to know that they’re fasting. The common theme in all those examples is that hypocrites are people who do what they do because they want to be seen by men and honored by them. Hypocrites want other people to notice how spiritual they are and how righteous they are.

Now, if you think about it for a minute, you may wonder why that is hypocrisy. I mean, these people really are giving and praying and fasting, so why is it hypocrisy for them to look like they’re giving and praying and fasting? The reason that is hypocrisy is because true spirituality – true righteousness – will humble you and make you forget about yourself. True righteousness deflects attention off yourself and toward God. True righteousness causes you to focus on God and to point other people to Him. True righteousness says what John the Baptist says, “He must become greater. I must become less.”

So, if you use righteous acts to draw attention to yourself, you’re using righteous acts for unrighteous purposes, and that makes you a hypocrite. That’s why Jesus says to give discreetly and to pray privately and to fast unnoticeably. Because those righteous acts aren’t about you. They’re about God, and if you use them to draw attention to yourself, you’ve missed the whole point. You’ve perverted a good thing. You’ve taken what should have been an act of worship toward God and turned it into an act of praise for yourself. You’re pretending to love God when what you really love is your own praise.

Now, real quickly, I want to mention one way that people often misunderstand Jesus’ teaching here. Some people wonder if Jesus’ command to pray privately means we shouldn’t ever pray in front of people… at a meal, in a worship service, in a Bible study. If you’ve ever wondered about that, let me share something with you that really helped me. There’s a difference between “praying to be seen” and “being seen praying.” Praying to be seen is when your real desire in praying is that people will notice you and be impressed that you’re praying… and Jesus warns against that. On the other hand, being seen praying simply means that you’re praying and people happen to see you… but that doesn’t matter because you’re praying to God and not to them. And we know that Jesus doesn’t forbid that, because Jesus

practiced that. We have all sorts of examples of Jesus praying in front of people in the Bible. He was seen praying, but He wasn’t praying to be seen. And that makes all the difference in the world. Remember, it’s about your heart and not just your behavior. You can pray publicly, and if you’re heart is wrong, you’re a hypocrite. Or you can pray publicly, and if you’re heart is right, you’re a godly example to others.

So Jesus’ main concern is whether your prayers are more focused on God or on you. And if your prayers are more about you than they are about God, you’re a hypocrite. And let’s be very careful at this point, because it’s easy for us to miss it. This is about a lot more than just prayer. If *any* aspect of your religion is more about you than it is about God, you’re a hypocrite. If your worship is more about your preferences than it is about praising God, you’re a hypocrite. If your prayer requests are more about your gossip than God’s glory, you’re a hypocrite. If your giving is more about securing power and praise for yourself than it is about contributing to the purposes and plans of God, you’re a hypocrite. If your religion is more about you than it is about God, you’re a hypocrite. So Church, I pray that we will be very careful to always make our religion about God and not about us.

And in the rest of our time together, I want us to talk about four ways to do this… four ways to guard against hypocrisy, so that our religious activities will be about God and not about us. The first two are negative – things to avoid – and the last two are positive – things to do.

First, don’t judge by mere appearances. Don’t judge people by the way they dress or the way they look or even the good things they do in public. Do you know how shallow that is? And do you know how often you’ll be wrong? Also, don’t get sucked into the game of thinking that your worth and your value are tied up in the way you dress or the way you look. Our culture places way too much emphasis on outer appearances. God is concerned with your heart. So, as long as you judge by mere appearances, you’re thinking like the world and not like God. Don’t judge by mere appearances.

The second way to guard against hypocrisy is: Don’t be impressed with your own performance. This is a hard one for us. We do some righteous act, and we quickly start to think, “Hey, that was pretty righteous. Must mean I’m a pretty righteous person.” But there are at least three problems with that. First of all, if you’re impressed with your own performance, you’re still focusing on outward behaviors and appearances. Remember, just doing something righteous on the outside doesn’t guarantee that your heart is really righteous on the inside. You may be impressed with yourself when there’s absolutely no reason to be. You may be impressed that you prayed and read your Bible every day last week, and at that very moment, your heart may be rotting away with pride and anger and envy and lust and self-righteousness.

A second problem with being impressed with your performance is found in Luke 17:10. Do you know what Jesus says in that verse? We don’t talk about that verse a whole lot. Jesus says, *“Whenever you have done everything you were told to do, (you) should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”* Wow. Even if you’re perfectly righteous, you’ve only done what you were supposed to do. Jesus says, “Don’t be impressed with yourself. You’re supposed to be righteous.”

Now, don’t misunderstand what Jesus is saying there. He’s not saying that God doesn’t care about your righteous acts. God does care. In fact, in His grace, God will reward your righteous acts. BUT, it’s not because they’re overly impressive.

It’s because God is a loving and gracious God. God is so loving and so gracious that He rewards you for things you’re supposed to do.

It’s a lot like what Christy and I do with Annie, our dog. Every time Annie eats her dog food, she runs into the family room and starts chomping her jaws to show us that she ate. Now, she’s supposed to eat. She needs to eat. If she doesn’t eat, she’ll die. It’s really not that impressive. But you know what Christy and I do when she comes running into the family room? We praise her and pet her and love on her. Why? Because we love her, and our love prompts us to graciously reward her for something she should be doing anyway.

That is exactly how God treats your righteous acts. God lovingly and graciously rewards you. But that’s no reason to be impressed with yourself. You should be impressed with how loving and gracious God is to reward you when you’ve only done your duty.

The third and biggest problem with being impressed with your own performance is that it robs God of the glory that is rightfully His. Remember what Jesus has already taught us in this sermon. He has taught us that we’re poor in spirit. We’re spiritually bankrupt and have nothing good to our own credit. And the only way for us to become righteous is if God fills us with His righteousness. So any righteousness we have is God’s and not ours. And in Matthew 5:16 Jesus tells us that people should praise God for our good deeds. In other words, because God is the one who makes you righteous, if you do something righteous, God gets the credit and not you. And that means any time you’re impressed with your own performance, you’re taking credit for something that God has done. You’re robbing God of the glory that rightfully belongs to Him.

So, the first two ways to guard against hypocrisy: Don’t judge by mere appearances. And don’t be impressed with your own performance.

The third way to guard against hypocrisy is to do things because they’re right. Here’s what I mean: When Jesus talks about hypocrites in these verses, what makes them hypocrites is that they do their righteous acts in order to be seen by men and

praised by them. It’s not enough for them to just do what’s right. Their real motivation is that they want to look good and be noticed and get attention and be praised. And Jesus says that’s hypocrisy. True righteousness means that you do what’s right simply because it’s right.

And I hope you realize that this truth runs much deeper than just wanting people to notice us. How often are our decisions influenced more by what is easy than what is right? How often do we think more about the financial benefit or financial cost than what is right? How often are we more concerned with public opinion than what is right? How often do we care more about what we want than what is right? We have all sorts of motives for what we do. And Jesus tells us to do things because they’re right. Period. Even if it’s inconvenient, even if it’s hard, even if it’s unpopular, even if it’s costly, even if there’s opposition, do what’s right simply because it’s right.

And, Church, I personally want to make a commitment to you that, by the grace of God, as far as it depends on me, at this church we will strive to do what is right simply because it’s right. You know as well as I do that there is always a temptation in church to do certain things because certain people will like it, or to not do certain things because certain people won’t like it. And I pray that our hearts will be purer than that. I pray that what we do and what we don’t do will be dictated by what’s right, not by popular opinion, not by the praise of men, and not by the fear of men. We will do things simply because they’re right.

And Church, this also means I need to ask something of you. There will be times when some of you will disagree with decisions that are made. And that’s okay. In fact, it’s inevitable. There are a lot of decisions to make and a lot of people with a lot of opinions. And sometimes we’re going to disagree. But what I ask is that when that disagreement is a matter of opinion or preference, I ask that you would joyfully embrace the fact that we’re not going to base our decisions on those things. We’re going to try to do what is right, even if not everyone likes it… even if sometimes you don’t like it. We want to do things because they’re right, even if it doesn’t always fit your opinions or preferences. Fair enough? We want to do things because they’re right.

Finally, let’s look at the fourth way to guard against hypocrisy. In all three examples that Jesus mentions, He says that hypocrites do what they do in order to be seen by men. And He says that when they receive the praise of men, they have received their reward in full. Now, let’s make sure we flesh that all the way out. The reason they have received their reward in full when they have received the praise of men is because that’s what they desired. The desire of their hypocritical hearts was for the praise of men and they got that. Then, in each example, Jesus contrasts that with truly righteous people. He says truly righteous people aren’t concerned with being seen by men. And the reason they aren’t concerned with being seen by men is because they know that God sees what is done in secret, and God will reward them. Now, let’s make sure we flesh that all the way out, too. The fact that they would rather have God see them and reward them than men see them and praise them tells us two things. First, they are so focused on God that they don’t care what men think. And second, they desire the reward of God more than the praise of men. And in that we find the fourth way to guard against hypocrisy. We must have a radical focus on God and a passionate desire for God. We should value what God thinks more than what men think. We should rather please God than impress men. Why? Because God is more important than men! We should be radically focused on God, because God is more important than anything else in the world! We should have a passionate desire for God, because God is more valuable than anything else in the world. We should value the reward of God more than the praise of men because the reward of God really is more valuable. It’s foolish to trade the reward of God for the praise of men. The praise of men is fickle and temporary and ultimately worthless. The reward of God is trustworthy and eternal and infinitely valuable.

So, when we have a radical focus on God and a passionate desire for God, there’s no longer any room for hypocrisy in our lives. We aren’t distracted or enticed by lesser things. We aren’t tempted to do the right things for the wrong reasons, because small stuff like the praise of men doesn’t motivate us anymore. We see how worthless it really is, because we see it in comparison to how valuable God really is. And hypocrisy is purged from our lives, because we are so consumed with God that our focus and our passion is for Him alone and nothing else. We must have a radical focus on God and a passionate desire for God.

And as we get ready to close, I want to make sure you see what Jesus is really doing here. Jesus is testing the reality of your relationship with God. If you do righteous acts and God is the only one who ever knows, will that be enough for you? And that’s a harder question than we like to admit. The praise of men is a strong seduction. We like for people to know we’ve done good things and to praise us for it. And Jesus wants to know: does God matter to you more than that? If all you have is the praise of God and no one else, is that enough for you? Is God so real to you that you are content for Him to be the only one who knows about your righteous acts? Is your relationship with God so deep and so real that He is all that matters? The only way you will be satisfied with God being the only who knows is if God is truly and utterly real in your life. You must have a radical focus on God and a passionate desire for God.

So Church, I pray that we will heed Jesus’ warning today. If you do righteous acts without a righteous heart, you’re just a religious hypocrite. So I pray that your heart will reflect the truth of Jesus’ teaching, and you will guard against hypocrisy in your life. I pray that you won’t judge by mere appearances. I pray that you won’t be impressed with your own performance. I pray that you will do things simply because they’re right. And above all else, I pray that you will have a radical focus on God and a passionate desire for God.