

“Actions Speak Louder than Words?”—Matthew 23:1-3

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Actions Speak Louder than Words?”, is Matthew 23:1-3 → *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

“Well ya know, actions speak louder than words.” While this axiom sounds legitimate as words by which to live, it is a statement which I’ve heard used in different ways. Objectively it can be used to point out the importance of actions and their influence upon others. Behavioral experts in the world recognize the impact of one person’s behavior influencing how those around him also act. Yet, as people watch other people’s behavior they will also see that their words do not always match up with their actions.

Thus, this statement can be made by a person to point out the inconsistency of behavior and speech in someone’s life. In effect, one might accuse the other of not “practicing what he preaches.” While there is validity to expose hypocritical behavior in an effort to bring a person to repentance of sin and announce forgiveness in Christ, the danger is

simply making the statement in self-righteous judgment. Then the statement is used to point out the hypocritical behavior of others in an effort to justify my own hypocritical behavior. The axiom “actions speak louder than words” is then used to make yourself look better at the expense of other’s acting in the sin of hypocrisy. True to its nature sin then breeds more sin as the devil seeks to destroy relationships with God and others in an effort to lead us to hell in unrepentance.

Jesus teaches us in our text how to be discerning in such temptation to act hypocritically while pointing out the hypocritical actions of others. While teaching *the crowds and . . . His disciples* He told them how to deal with the Pharisees, whom He here exposed as hypocrites. He pointed out the impact which inconsistent words and actions can have upon a relationship with Him in the example of these *scribes and the Pharisees*.

He said in verse 2 of our text: *The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat*. Sitting *on Moses’ seat* was a phrase used to describe the basis of their religious authority. Simply put *the scribes* were the experts in God’s Law given in the first five books of the Old Testament written by Moses. *The Pharisees* considered themselves the “authorized” successors of Moses as teachers and interpreters of that Law for God’s people. As Jesus revealed throughout this discourse about *the scribes and the Pharisees* that their interpretation of God’s Old Testament Laws

laid heavy burdens upon people in their relationship with the LORD which they themselves were unwilling to carry or relieve. He said in Matthew 23:4-5 → *They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.* He also stated that they *do all their deeds* for the sole purpose of being *seen by others*.

Notice the respect for the proclamation of God's Word and its power for our lives to which Jesus directed the people. In verse 3 of our text He commanded them to *do and observe whatever they* told them. **Obedience to a religious leader is always based upon the proclamation of God's Word, not the person sharing it.** What if that person is actually a hypocrite? How will you know he is a hypocrite since you cannot know the true belief in his heart? Omniscience is an attribute exclusively belonging to Yahweh, including Jesus Who is Yahweh in the flesh. Thus, when He referred to *the scribes and the Pharisees as hypocrites* he knew exactly what He was talking about because He knew their hearts. (cf. Matthew 23:13,15,23,25,27,29)

I have heard Christians make the statement that "we're all hypocrites." Striving to put the best construction on everything, I think they are trying to say that we're all sinners. However, according to Scripture, while a hypocrite is a sinner, not all sinners are hypocrites. A hypocrite is a sinner who insists on clinging to unrepentant sin while

living amongst others as a person who confesses Jesus as his Lord and Savior, in effect pretending to be a Christian. Paul described such a person as one who claims to be a brother in Christ (i.e. a believer) yet continues to live in sin with unrepentance. (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-11) He says in 2 Timothy 3:5 that such a person has *the appearance of godliness, but denies its power*. Jesus says in verse 3 of our text that *the scribes and the Pharisees* were hypocrites because *they preach, but did not practice* what they preach. Thus His instruction to *do and observe whatever they* told them but not do *the works they* did.

So . . . it's one thing to **be** a hypocrite—a very serious position placing one's eternal life in jeopardy—and another to **act** hypocritically in the sight of others. While Jesus knew that *the scribes and the Pharisees* were hypocrites and declared them so, all He could do for the people was point out their behavior which was inconsistent with God's written Word. In Matthew 15:7-8 He said to them: *You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."*

A hypocrite is a sinner who says he is a Christian **while clinging to unrepentant sin and finding a false security in that sin by the traditions and commandments of men**. Jesus says in Matthew 23:12

→ *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled.* In effect, being a hypocrite is exalting yourself in ways which strive to bring attention to yourself **at God's expense**. Such a person *will be humbled*, either in this life now to lead to repentance . . . or . . . in the next life with eternal punishment in hell.

A Christian is a sinner who believes in the atoning work of Jesus for the forgiveness of his sin with the desire to change his sinful ways. This is the one to whom Jesus refers in Matthew 23:12 when He said: *Whoever humbles himself will be exalted.* When you come before the Lord humbly confessing your sins He will give you complete and totally forgiveness of your sins, exalting you—that is, lifting you up with the burden of sin lifted for living a new way in His grace! A Christian's primary purpose is to be faithful to the Lord without concern for recognition by others.

Actions are very important in your life as a Christian. However, they do not speak louder than words. Rather, they speak in the midst of your words. This is why falling into the sin of hypocrisy, where your words stating what's right and wrong are spoken amidst actions which do not uphold what's right and wrong, can cause offense to the Gospel of Jesus. Inconsistent words and actions may hinder the proclamation of God's Will and Word being accepted by others. **It takes the focus off of Christ and puts it on yourself so that people can't get past your**

sin to see Christ's love!

However, this too provides an opportunity to witness Christ to others as they see how you deal with your sin properly by confession of your sin and receiving the absolution of Jesus. When you act in humility you will strive to place the attention completely on the Person & Work of Jesus as you serve others and proclaim God's Word to them. This means, you are willing to humble yourself, confess your sins (including the sin of hypocrisy) and function as Christ's humble servant in the presence of others. (cf. Matthew 23:11-12) In this way your actions actually speak to others **of Christ and His work of atoning sin** along with your words!

When it comes to your relationship with Jesus actions do speak in support of words which flow from faith! Your sin is not an excuse to act hypocritically. Rather, your sins are taken to Jesus based on the perfectly consistent behavior which He displayed **for you!** Romans 5:19 says: *For as by the one man's disobedience (i.e. Adam) the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience (i.e. Jesus) the many will be made righteous.* Christ's obedience within which His actions spoke in accordance with the promises of God's written Word makes you righteous and blameless before God through faith in Him! Likewise, your actions of **repentance of sin and faith in Jesus** will speak loudly to others to the praise of God's glory! Amen.

Referring to us a lights in the world, Jesus said:

*Let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father Who is in heaven.*

(Matthew 5:16)

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