

Holiness: Simplicity: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

The religion of Israel is a great theater. Moses goes up on the mountain and the clouds close underneath him like curtains. He brings down the commandments, and the children of Israel are unimpressed. Solomon builds a huge temple. Inside, behind a great curtain, is the Holy of Holies, where the high priest, like Moses before him, communes with the Lord. He returns from this holy communion with the most precious gift, the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the broken covenant.

Jesus takes this theater for granted. He does not tell his disciples to keep the commandments; he assumes that they will. He also assumes that they will want to go beyond the commandments. Like any observant Jew, they will want to serve their neighbor by giving alms, worship God by praying and live a disciplined life by fasting. Jesus does not say “*if you fast*” but “*when you fast.*”

But there is a danger backstage in this theater. For when they leave the land of avoiding misdeeds, the land of “you shall not,” the land of commandments, to enter the land of holy living, the land “you shall,” the disciples are in a different kind of theater. It can easily become the theater of performance and show, the theater of appearance and deceit. In this theater almsgiving is rewarded by trumpet fanfare, prayer is a public parade, and the discomfort of fasting is a spectacle. The theater of religion becomes a gaudy charade.

Jesus redefines the theater. This is not a theater of spectacle or display, but a secret theater. In the drama of salvation, God is the actor and the disciple is the spectator. In the drama of holy life, the stage is a locked room, the actor is the disciple and the audience is God. The place of encounter between God and his people is not the temple, the great theater, the Holy of Holies. It is the locked room (where the disciple meets God one on one), the anonymous gift, the undisclosed hunger.

The child of God wants to be noticed, respected, admired. The child—and we are all children—wants to be the center of people’s attention. We can have that if we want it. Or we can be the center of God’s attention. We choose our audience. If we choose the crowd, we have our reward already. If we choose God, we receive another thing

a child loves: we get to share a secret. The secret of holiness that is between God and the disciple is not the stuff of newspaper revelations or talk-show speculation. It is a bond that time and death will never break.

Behind these two theaters—the theater of the crowd and the theater of the locked room—lies a significant irony. Every theater is a kind of game, a kind of suspended disbelief with an agreed set of rules. The players in the game are called the actors. And the Greek word for actor is . . . hypocrite. We are taught that hypocrisy is a terrible thing. But what is giving alms without anyone knowing, if it is not saying one thing and doing another? What is praying in secret, unless it is pretending to be something you are not?

What we have here is not the choice between acting and integrity, but between two kinds of acting. It is not about avoiding hypocrisy, but about choosing what kind of hypocrite you want to be. Some kinds of hypocrisy are inevitable, even desirable. This is because the world we live in is open to multiple interpretations. There is much good, yet there is real evil. One can say that there is no reward for good, and act accordingly: the cynic is never disappointed. Or one can say that there *is* reward for good, but wholly or largely in another world. This is faith. It calls the disciple to live, at least part of the time, *as if he or she were already in the next world*, a world where all share freely and constantly commune with God—in short, a life of love. But this requires the disciple to be an actor, a hypocrite, by seeming to live in this world when deep down he believes in the next. If these alternatives seem too stark, one can hedge one's bets: gain what reward this life has to offer, but do so by gesturing toward the next.

It is this last option that Matthew's Gospel condemns so heavily, and describes as hypocrisy—though a better description might simply be lack of faith. A person who lacks faith settles for the majority verdict—the good esteem of the crowd—while the disciple who has faith knows there is only one verdict that matters: the judgment of God.

The faithless disciple aims for both heaven and earth and gets neither. But the faithful one receives an unexpected bonus. Secret almsgiving, prayer and fasting have an additional political and eschatological dimension. The disciple who can fast, who can depend on God for sustenance for a whole day or two, will not be easy prey to purveyors of instant gratification and immediate solutions, or to advertising, which dominates the contemporary world, with its promise of rapid—and empty—reward. The disciple who can pray, who can depend on God's judgment

rather than the world's valuation, will not be at the mercy of popularity or fashion. And the disciple who can give alms will quietly question a politics that thinks it must choose between the maternal state and the selfish individual. Receipt of such alms may even undermine the cynicism of the one who sees no good in this world or any other, and takes hypocrisy to be the worst sin.