

TOXIC

DAY 1

It's easy to put on the mask of hypocrisy...

Think about what it must have been like to be a Pharisee or Teacher of the Law.

At a young age, you studied the law and perhaps dreamed of one day being like King David, a man after God's own heart. While studying, praying, and meditating, you saw those around you becoming so devout. Their holiness caused you to become embarrassed and ashamed of your inability to relate to the faith, grand visions, and passion others share about God. As no one notices your silence, they simply assume you know what they're talking about! Soon it actually becomes easy to pretend you know what they're talking about. You pray the prayers, you recite the scriptures, you do the "deal" and before long it seems like it's right and true. At the same time, others notice how holy and devout you've become while being secretly embarrassed and ashamed of their own lack of faith, passion...

READ Matthew 23:27-28 and Revelation 3:1-3.

All of us, to some extent, play a part in hypocrisy. Perhaps you wear the mask of the strong, self-assured business leader undaunted by the future, the busy mother who cooks nutritious and delicious dinners in her immaculate home, or the student who's always prepared and never performs below average.

READ Matthew 7:21-23 and Matthew 23:33. *Why do you think Jesus gives such repeated and serious warnings to avoid religious hypocrisy? How big of a deal is it really?*

DAY 2

READ Jesus' warning about the yeast of the Pharisees in Luke 12:1. *In what way can you relate to the unfolding story? Do you put on or accept a mask of hypocrisy in your own life? Have you ever given the appearance of being something/someone you're not? Do you fear others may see through your mask and discover who you really are?*

Think about the following statement:

Hypocrisy kills spiritual growth by hiding dysfunction and sin.

READ John 3:1-9. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was seen as one who gave answers and guidance. But he came to Jesus with questions and doubts. THINK about what Nicodemus had to lay aside as he came honestly before Jesus. *Pride? Fear? Religious hypocrisy?* Only by being vulnerable and exposing our true selves are we able to learn and grow -- to actually move toward becoming the person we desire to be.

READ John 19:38-40. We don't know the details of Nicodemus' late night conversation with Jesus, but know he came to Jesus in secret, admitting his ignorance. Awareness and reflection are keys to overcoming hypocrisy in our lives, but nothing is more central to its undoing than the transparency of confession.

PRAY: *Father, I confess that I'm not always who I pretend to be. Bring to light the hidden dysfunctions and sin that hide behind hypocrisy in my heart.*

DAY 3

READ Matthew 23:1-7, 13-33. *Do these words apply to my behaviors? My way of thinking? The motives of my heart? Could these words of caution and warning be for me?*

PRAY: *Father, give me courage to admit the truths You bring to light in my heart.*

Toxic religion can so easily seep into our hearts, our minds, our families, and even our churches. The real danger of toxic religion is the ever-increasing self-certainty and justification, which push us and others away from God.

"Your lives are roadblocks to God's kingdom. You refuse to enter, and won't let anyone else in either."

Matthew 23:13b - The Message

SPEND some time journaling your thoughts as you READ the scriptures and

CONSIDER Jesus' warnings. *Are there signs of yeasty (toxic) religion in your life?*

Of hypocrisy? Are you focused on following external rules and expect others to do the same?

Are you quick to see and point out the toxicity in others' lives but have difficulty seeing it in your own life? REFLECT on the truths that God has revealed.

DAY 4

READ Matthew 23:13-33. Awareness and reflection are keys to overcoming hypocrisy in our lives, but nothing is more central to its undoing than the transparency of confession - to God, ourselves, and others. We need authentic community - people in our lives who understand and accept where we are on our journey, and will walk with us to help us as we take steps toward God.

In order to value authenticity, we must be willing to be vulnerable, and that's altogether a different animal! We desire **connection** and **acceptance** but fear **exposing** our true selves. We desire **authenticity** but fear **vulnerability**. It's easier (and safer) to engage in great theological debates than to acknowledge our fear of failure, our pride or prejudice, and the truth of our own brokenness. This is why Jesus brings it to the heart level. Our Rabbi calls us to more. The path to authentic community begins as we ACKNOWLEDGE our fears as we connect on deeper levels, allowing those in our community to sort through redemption, acceptance, and finding the beauty in brokenness.

THINK about the people to whom you're closest. *Do you share the kind of relationship where transparency and confession are accepted and encouraged? If not, what steps might you take to move toward that kind of relationship? If you're in a small group, do you consider your group to be a place of authentic community? If not, why not?*

DAY 5 **one more warning**

Toxic religion through hypocrisy kills our spiritual growth by hiding our dysfunctions and sin. But it also kills **authentic community** when it creates a "don't ask, don't tell" environment by keeping things externally focused. Another way it kills community is when a **plastic imitation** of healthy relationships and community is encouraged by trying to **manage** transparency and authenticity. This "external" community encourages us to be as transparent as possible while maintaining the generational and cultural ideas of performance and perfection. We manage our transparency and protect the image of pristine Christian perfection by slightly exposing a wound or broken piece of our soul, deflecting with humor, then concluding with a scripture. This is TOXIC community. It will only lead us further away from our love for God and others.

How do we move authentic vulnerability from our heads to our hearts?

We must be willing to 1] push beyond our feelings of fear or shame, 2] go through the fear of rejection and condemnation, 3] honestly stand before another and acknowledge our own fear of failure, pride, and brokenness. From the deepest recesses of our hearts, we must be able to say **"without Christ, I can do nothing."**

John 15:5

READ Matthew 23:37. Our Rabbi is calling us to more, as He pleads with us to choose a better way. *Are we willing?*

March 26/27, 2011