

Sin in a Three-Piece Suit

Matthew 23

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connect
groups

PATH

Someone remarked that *our sense of sin is in proportion to our nearness to God*. We're usually good at being aware of blatant wickedness, but what about less obvious infractions? Are we willing to point fingers at others for flagrant iniquity while coddling our own vices? The truth is that many are too Christian to enjoy sinning while being too fond of sinning to enjoy Christianity. In this series called White Collar Sins, Pastor Skip hopes to stimulate a heart for holiness for a fulfilled life and happy relationships. To start off this series, Pastor Skip considered five characteristics of sin:

I. Sin Is Detectable (vv. 1-3)

II. Sin Is Dangerous (v. 23a)

III. Sin Is Diverse (v. 23-26)

IV. Sin Is Deceptive (v. 27)

V. Sin Is Dismissible (v. 37)

POINTS

Sin Is Detectable:

- Masks were part of ancient Greek theater, and the term *hypocrite* described the two-faced actors. Later it began to be used for someone who pretends to be something they are not.
- The phrase *white-collar crime* was coined by criminologist Edwin Sutherland. It referenced someone who committed a nonviolent crime for financial gain.
- White collar *sin* isn't what we think of as typical, obvious sin; it often wears a mask of decency, even religiousness.
- Hamartiology is the study of sin. We study sin because before we can understand salvation, we must understand how much we need it. Hamartiology explains the problem and points to the solution.
- In Matthew 23, Jesus confronted the religious elite, showing them the harm of their hypocrisy.
- Sin is detectable to a holy God; the word *hamartia* means *to miss the mark*. Sin is "any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature."¹
- The word *sin* is used 446 times in the Bible; *sins* is used 187 times.
- Today, sin has been explained away by psychology and sociology. Many religions disregard it as relative or illusory.
- **Probe:** Because God knows everything, He knows every sin. But how can other people detect sin (actions, words, etc.)?

Sin Is Dangerous:

- Jesus used the word woe eight times in Matthew 23 as an exclamation of grief to cry out against the Pharisees and scribes.
- Sin is so bad that it brings judgment and separation from God. God's entire activity

on earth centers on curing the sin problem.

- Sadly, some recognize sin in others, but fail to recognize it in themselves.
- **Probe:** Discuss this Martin Luther quote: "The recognition of sin is the beginning of salvation." Why is this true?

Sin Is Diverse:

- In the Old Testament, some were so concerned with the details of giving, they forgot the big things—mercy, justice, and faith. In their legalism, they neglected what God desired for their lives. Sin is more than just actions; it is also attitude.
- There are two major types of sins:
 - Sins of commission: doing something we shouldn't
 - Sins of omission: not doing something we should (see James 4:17)
- Some sins are obvious, and some are not so obvious. Some are open and flagrant, and others are hidden and appear respectable.
- The less obvious are white-collar sins: gossip, selfishness, bitterness, anger, gluttony, prayerlessness, and envy.
- **Probe:** Discuss the two types of sins and the different sins that fall within each group. Why are both types considered *sin*—missing the mark?

Sin Is Deceptive:

- Many religious people are skillful at making appearances of right living: they're clean on the outside, but dirty on the inside (see v. 5), ensuring their works are seen by men.
- The greatest blasphemy isn't a person who doesn't know, walk with, or love God,

but one who pretends to know, walk, and love God—but doesn't.

- This is why we need to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33).
- **Probe:** Charles Spurgeon said, "If you're not seeking the Lord, the Devil is seeking you." Why is it important to seek the Lord with your whole person (heart, mind, soul, and strength), and not just one part of you? Will sin permit a half-hearted approach to God?

Sin Is Dismissible:

- As Jesus closed His last public sermon, He lamented His people's refusal to receive the cure for sin. He used tender language—"as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (v. 37)—showing His desire to forgive, heal, and dismiss sin.
- Sin is the problem, and Christ is the cure. Jesus came to forgive sin and demonstrate God's love (see Matthew 1; Luke 19).
- In verse 37, we see the greatest opportunity and the greatest tragedy:
 - Opportunity: "I wanted to gather your children together."
 - Tragedy: "But you were not willing" (the worst sin of omission).
- There's only one thing improved by breaking: the heart of a sinner. Jesus will improve your life for all eternity.
- **Probe:** Discuss Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit." Why does God desire a broken spirit? How does God restore your spirit? Jesus is willing and able to take care of your sin. Are you willing to let Him?

PRACTICE

Connect Up: Only a holy being can have complete fellowship with a perfectly holy God. How does Christ's righteousness make us holy, allowing us to come boldly before God's throne (see Hebrews 4:16)? Discuss this statement: Jesus' righteousness is imputed to us (He saves us—see 2 Corinthians 5:21), and by the

Spirit we are sanctified (continually made holy over time).

Connect In: In church, it's easy to wear a mask and be a hypocrite. How can we guard ourselves from being like the religious elite in Matthew 23? Chip Ingram suggested three ways:² begin within (look at yourself), start with your own heart (your attitude),

and weigh the consequences (your actions). How do you deal with hypocrisy in your heart?

Connect Out: How would you answer a nonbeliever who says, "The church is full of hypocrites. I've never found a Christian I can trust"?

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1999, p. 210.

² Living on the Edge, "How to Overcome Hypocrisy in Your Heart, Part 1," <https://livingontheedge.org/broadcast/how-to-overcome-hypocrisy-in-your-heart-part-1/daily-radio#WlqpOIUfHFY>, accessed 1/14/18.