

The Real You
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash-Wednesday at Duke Chapel
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In 1987, a well-known Pastor named Bill Hybels wrote a book called *Who are you when no one is looking*¹. This was one of those rare books where the title itself summarized the whole point of the book. Today, this is the question that I would like to begin this sermon. Who are you, or who is the ‘real you’ when no one is looking, or on the other hand, who do we become when others are looking?

Through the title of this book, we are presented with this human tendency to act and behave like chameleons—quickly changing our color, behavior, speech, and even faith convictions based upon the differing situations and surroundings we are engaged in. The *telos* of this book like so many church slogans is to invite people to live in greater authenticity regardless of their surroundings.

However, isn’t it only natural that we will act differently, say during a professional meeting or during a lecture, to the way many of us will act tonight while watching the Duke-UNC game? Even in our society, the worldly-wisdom is to act accordingly to each situation that will maximize our benefit. To this end, we offer seminars that coaches people in how to act professional and sound competent during that first job interview. We take courses in interpersonal communications that helps us better relate with varieties of people. Or during that first date, we endeavor to act like real gentleman or a lady—only putting the best foot-forward.

Albeit that it does require some level of becoming someone you are not in order to land that first job or date, this play-acting however does not bode well within the Christian worship. In today’s lesson in Matthew 6, Jesus warns that worship is the one area where we cannot act or become someone we are not. When Jesus mentions that when practicing our acts of righteousness; When giving to the needy, to not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do; Or when praying, to not be like hypocrites who love to pray standing in places to be seen and heard by others; Or when fasting to not look somber as the hypocrites do.

The word hypocrite is used in this text literally to mean ‘play-acting’. Meaning, like real actors who have the task of memorizing lines for a movie—to either play the role of a

¹ Bill Hybels, *Who are you when no one is looking: Choosing consistency, Resisting compromise* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987).

villain or a hero. We all know that their speech and actions have nothing to do with who they really are! Hence, the admonition of Matthew 6 is for us to not engage in worship as mere performers—where we are simply repeating a prayer script or engaging in behavior to be seen by others.

Instead, worship needs to become what Ephesians 3:17 in the New Living Translations alludes to—that in our worship experience, Christ will become more and more at home in our hearts, and that is where we are to be most real.

There are two very important components to Christian worship, whether it is in the act of giving to the poor, joining in a prayer, or partaking in a fast.

The first component is the inner experience of the individual and the community, where the act of worship is done before the audience of ONE—before God and God alone.

Perhaps this is what Jesus refers to as doing these acts of worship in the secret—in that intimate place where the only one we are striving to please is the Father who sees us, and rewards our prayers, our fasting, and our giving.

The second is the outer feature of worship, which is the evangelistic and prophetic calling that is expressed before the audience of the world.

In Matthew 6, Jesus is warning his disciples that when there is a disparity and disconnect between the inner reality of worship to the outer expression of worship, we are in danger of becoming hypocrites—as those who are merely play-acting.

For when these acts of worship, such as giving of charity, prayer and fasting is engaged not before the audience of One, but instead if it is engaged as mere play-acting, then it will be devoid of God's reward, which is His power, His Blessing, and His presence. In turn, we will be missing on the intended purpose of the very acts of worship themselves, which is to bring the world and ourselves to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Today, as we mark the beginning of this Lenten season by marking our foreheads with ashes, the encouragement and challenge before us is to go beyond the mere play-acting tendencies we have, and pursue the inner experience of worship which supports the outer expression that the world is forced to visibly witness upon our foreheads.

With these ashes we are to engage in worship by deeply considering our need of God, as we delve deeply into our hearts, recognizing our mortality, our finite and temporal lives, and the horror and the depth of our estrangement from God.

With these ashes we are coming in repentance before the audience of One. As the people of God, we recognize our utter need of the salvific work of Christ and the Spirit given revival in our midst.

With these ashes, we are also proclaiming to the world that humanity's troubles can only be resolved with God and by God. Especially these days as we are faced with the horrors of violence both abroad and at home, the senseless killings around us, and the rampant evil in society. These are not pretend, play-acting, make-belief world that we live in. Rather, they are real! The pain, the hurts, the chaos around us is real.

Today, may these ashes we are imposing on our foreheads express real repentance, real acknowledgement of our need of God.

These ashes however are not the conclusion of the story. Today we are not only recognizing our need of God, but we also put on these ashes on our foreheads as a sign of hope. The hope which we will celebrate 40 days from now, of the Easter message and reality—*that while we were still sinners, far from God, God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only son, and who ever believes in him will not die but have eternal life.* With these ashes we await and anticipate in hope the coming of the message we will receive on Good Friday and Easter—of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the real message of hope and salvation for the world. Amen