

THE VISION
“An Inclusive Church: Come As You Are”
New City Church of LA
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I. Introduction

Welcome to New City Church!

- We are a church in the process of being planted.
- Grand Opening. Invite friends. Call them. Send emails. Just ask them to come and check out New City Church. Take a stack of postcards. You can pass them out to everyone you know.

- Next week, we are going to start a new series on the Gospel of Mark. It’s going to be called The Real Jesus.

Today, we are going to finish the series on the vision of New City Church. As we prepare for our Grand Opening next Sunday, we want to examine who we are seeking to be what we are seeking to do. Let’s read our vision statement together. [Read together]

Last week, we looked into our vision of becoming an inclusive church and looked into the unifying power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to bring people together across racial lines, socio-economic lines, and experiential lines.

Today, I want to look at a different aspect of what it means to be an inclusive church. I don’t know if you know, but each word of the vision statement is defined by our core values. “Inclusive” does not *just* mean we’re going to be multi-ethnic and multi-socio-economic church. It means that we are a **come-as-you-are church**. We are a church anyone can come to, whatever your sexual orientation, your lifestyle, your work, your education, your culture, your race, your class, your past. We open the door wide open for all. Why? Because Jesus did.

One striking pattern we find in the life of Jesus is this: the more messed up the characters, the more at ease they seem to feel around Jesus. They found Jesus appealing: a Samaritan outcast who was married 5 times and living with someone without being married, a cheating tax collector, a recent host to seven demon, prostitutes, lepers, and blind people. But, Jesus got a chilly reception from the respectable types: Pious

Pharisees thought of him as unclean and questionable, a rich young ruler walked away shaking his head, and even the open-minded Nicodemus, a religious leader, came to meet him under the cover of darkness.

Don't you think this pattern is strange in light of the fact that it seems that the Christian church now attracts the respectable types who most resemble those who were suspicious of Jesus and does not seem to attract the type of people who liked to hang out with Jesus.

I heard of a story by a person who works with people who are down and out. A prostitute came to him in wretched straits, homeless, her health failing, unable to buy food for her two year old daughter. In tears, she confessed that she had been renting out her daughter—two years old!—to men interested in kinky sex, in order to support her own drug habit. This person couldn't bear hearing the sordid details of her story. He sat in silence, not knowing what to say. At last he asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. He said, "I will never forget the look of pure astonishment that crossed her face as she said: Church! Why would I ever go there? They'd just make me feel even worse than I already do!"

Somehow, the church has become a community of respectable people. The kind of people who flocked to Jesus are not feeling welcome. There's been a reversal. The church is called the Body of Christ, meaning that we are the manifestation of Jesus on earth. We are supposed to be Jesus but we attract the kind of people who weren't attracted to Jesus and repel the kind of people who would have been attracted to Jesus. What's going on?

I can get on the soap box and start critiquing the church and how far we have strayed. I can talk about how the Christian Right in America got too political by focusing on what we are against. We became intolerant and tried to legislate morality. People hear about abortion clinic bombings or "God hates fags" poster in anti-gay rights rallies. And of course, this creates the perception that American Christianity is really moralism, about dos and don'ts and telling other people that they have to abide by these dos and don'ts, instead of about God's love, mercy and grace through Jesus Christ.

I can go on and on about the wrong direction American Christianity has gone. We became a religion and lost the gospel. We failed to be a body of Christ. We failed to

be like Jesus. It's interesting that surveys show that people have a very very negative view of church, but they have a positive view of Jesus. People like Jesus; they just don't like the church. The church is viewed as intolerant, homophobic, narrow-minded, judgmental, holier and thou hypocrites. Who would want to go to church? Why should they be attracted to the church? We have become nothing like Jesus.

We have become like the religious people that were suspicious of Jesus, and whom Jesus rebuked. I'm not just talking about American churches in general but also each and everyone of us. We have become like those religious people. Before we start denying it, I want to examine a passage in which Jesus confronts the religious leaders of his time. The stuff he says, he says to us as well. And I think this passage show us why we have a hard time being a come-as-you-are church.

Let's read Matthew 23:1-12.

[Read]

This passage tells us three things: (1) the problem of our need to pretend; (2) the cause of the problem, and (3) solution to the problem.

II. The Problem of our need to pretend.

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the society. They were generally respected by the society as good people. They tried really hard to live by the 613 rules created to keep the rules in the Bible. It all started out with a lots good intentions, but they got wrapped up in counting whether they obeyed all the laws. They started to see how good they were, how righteous they were by seeing how many of the rules they kept. And they started to see how good others were, whether they were in or out, by whether they kept these rules. The problem was that they couldn't live by them; so, while they told other people they have to live by them and judged them if they didn't, they themselves couldn't handle it at least not genuinely; so, they started to pretend.

And Jesus confronted them with the harsh truth. He's talking to the disciples in front of the religious leaders.

In verse 5, Jesus says, "Everything they do is done for men to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garment long; they love the place of honor

at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they loved to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’”

Everything is about image management. They wanted to look like they have it all together. That they pray. That they are an important member of the synagogue. That they are important.

Before we slam the Pharisees, we need to examine whether we do the same thing? We all try to manage our image. As Nike used to say, “Image is everything.” We do this in and out of church. We want people to think that we are a good person. That we have it together. That we are successful. We try to live in the right neighborhood, that right loft. It doesn’t matter whether we are poor or rich, we all try to manage our image. That’s why you lie about yourself to people. That’s why you don’t want people to know about the issues you have, the thoughts you have.

We have a need to wear a mask. We have a need to pretend.

I confess that I have that need as well. I started to smoke in college. I hid this from people at church. In fact, my college pastor is here today, and this is the first time he’s hearing that I smoked while in college. I should note that I don’t think smoking is a moral issue at all, but at the time, people in the church didn’t smoke; so, I just pretended like I didn’t smoke. This went on for a long time. I was a deacon at my last church while I smoked. I only quite about 8 years ago when Grace was pregnant with Kaetlyn. I hid it from church people; I even hid from Grace. I used to pop a lot of Altoids.

We all play this game in life but it gets really bad when we go to church. People at work saw me smoke. But, at church, I couldn’t show that I smoked. I had to look holier. We don’t want to be judged. We don’t want to get rejected. It’s like the church is this bearer of high moral standard, at least that’s what we preach, and even if you don’t go around pretending that you party around, for example, when you come to church, you suddenly feel like you have to pretend like you don’t party. You might be wondering: What if they knew I was drunk last night? What if they knew I am sexually active? What if they found out I am gay?

Then, there are the moralist among us who feel like we live up to all the church rules. I do my quiet time. I fast. I tithe. I pray before I go to sleep, unless I am really

tired. I pray before I eat. I don't get drunk. I don't cuss. I don't do drugs. I don't sleep around.

In this passage, Jesus is telling the moralists that we are the Pharisees who are hypocritical and image managing. Here's what happens: We have a tendency to create external rules in order to know that we are okay. If we tithe, if we fast, if we do our quiet time, if we do this or that religious behavior, then we are okay. This gets worse as we become leaders—when we were just attending, the need to pretend was moderate, but when we became a leader, it got really bad. And, if we actually live by these rules, we have a tendency to feel like we are better than other people, and we get trapped in pride. If we don't live by these rules, we start pretending like we do but deep inside we start to rot.

Our need to pretend is addictive. It rots our soul.

III. What is the cause of the problem of our need to pretend?

In verse 8, Jesus said: “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

I don't think this means that if your dad calls today, you shouldn't call him father anymore.

A master, father, and teacher are the people who are on the top of the pecking order of life, at least to the Pharisees.

Jesus is saying: These are people we try to please in order to get approval, value and worth because we think these are the people who have the power to give it to us because they are at the top of the pecking order. They are the people who validate us. Jesus is saying don't seek approval from anyone, don't seek validation from anyone, seek approval, value and worth from God only.

Now, what does this have to do with what caused our need to pretend? The cause of our need to pretend is our need for approval and validation.

We all have this need for approval. We were born with it. We have it because we need to belong. We need to know that we are loved and approved. When the Bible talks about righteousness, it really means approval. We need righteousness. We need approval. Often times, the way we determine if we have approval in our lives is to see where we are on the pecking order. It tells us whether we are up or down. What I am telling you is that the reason we pretend is because we desperately want approval. So, you work really hard. Most of us can't live up to the standard of approval, so we pretend. So, we hide. And deeper yet, we feel a sense of inferiority and worthlessness. And depression sometimes results.

Why did I go around hiding and smoking? I wanted to be approved. Why do you act holier than thou art? Because you want approval. Why do you lie? You want approval. Why do you cover up your addictions? Why can't you admit it? Because you want approval.

Sometimes, we say, I don't care about what anyone else thinks. I'm my own man! Do you remember the regular skit on Saturday Night Live called Daily Affirmation with Stuart Smalley by Al Franken a few years back: He used to say: "*I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!*" The problem with the self-affirmation approach is that you don't believe it. Maybe you're not good enough, you're not smart enough, and maybe people don't like you that much.

You need something outside of you that tells you that you're approved or not. And you're desperate for it. To not be approved is painful. Rejection hurts. You rather pretend than to live in rejection.

IV. What is the solution of this problem of our need to pretend.

The answer is to look to God for approval through Jesus Christ, in humility. In verses 8-11, he's been saying don't look for approval by climbing up the pecking order, don't look for approval from other people, look for it from God. Then he says, in verse 12, "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

What does it mean to come in humility? It is to acknowledge that we're messed up. We can't measure up. It's not about *trying* to be humble. It's about *realizing* our

humility. The only way to realize our humility is to realize our brokenness, that we have been pretending to God, ourselves and to others. It's to see our true self and see the reality of the mess we live in.

He is saying that when we come to God in humility, God will approve of us. The one person who ultimately matters to us says he will approve of us. Doesn't our approval depend on our behavior? Doesn't it depend on how good we are? How successful we are? That's how our earthly masters, our parents, our teachers measured us. But, Jesus is radically trying to break us away from this paradigm and giving us a brand new Kingdom paradigm. This is the gospel-centered paradigm.

- God became man in the person of Jesus Christ and lived among us. He lived in perfect obedience and love. He had perfect righteousness, perfect beauty, perfect holiness.
- It's like he's up there, and we're down here all messed up and in need of approval, and he said, I'll trade places with you.
- That's the message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ:
 - you don't have to work for approval in your life, you just have to trade places with Jesus.
 - You don't have to sell yourself to find worth, value and validation in your life, you just have to trade places with Jesus.
 - You don't have to pretend to find approval, you just have to trade places with Jesus.
 - It's God's grace, which means gift, an undeserved gift to us, that gives you the deepest longing of your heart for ultimate approval and validation.
- When we traded places with Jesus, what happened?
 - Jesus took all of our failures, our sins, our dirtiness, our filth, our greed, our envy, our bitterness, and took them to the cross and died on the cross paying for the penalty of our sins.
 - We, on the other hand, received his righteousness. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says:

For our sake, he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- Paul says: Look, you didn't get God's righteousness/approval through your works. You got his righteousness/approval by trading places with Jesus; by mercy of Jesus, by the cross!
- This fact, the gospel fact, not only saves us, but changes us because we have no basis for pride. We have no basis for boasting. We have no basis for thinking that we are better than other people, because we are not! We can't actually think that we are better than other people. It doesn't work anymore. When we look at ourselves honestly, we deserve to be on the bottom, so that gives us the reason to be humble. The gospel actually keeps us humble. But, we are accepted and approved by God. We have the righteousness of God. We are considered as beautiful, holy, righteous, and perfect as Jesus. This gives us confidence. We can actually be humble and confident at the same time, and this without pride. And so, the gospel actually frees us from the pecking order rat race.
 - We don't have to get the biggest house or the fastest car to feel like we are somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done and given to us.
 - We don't have to be the most beautiful, tallest, the skinniest to feel like we are somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done for us and given to us.
 - We don't have to have graduated from that school or get that job or get that promotion to feel like we are somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done and given to us.
 - We don't have to live up to what our parents expected of us, to feel like we are accepted and approved. We are accepted and approved because of what Christ has done and given to us.
 - We don't have to prove anything. We don't have to make it to the top of the ladder to be somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done and given to us.

- Now, we can take off our mask, and be free from our need to pretend.

The vision of our church is to be an inclusive gospel-centered community. Do you see why we have to be gospel-centered in order to be inclusive? The only way we can create a community where we are honest, authentic, raw, accepting, loving, warm, and real is if we take a hold of our approval and value from God and stop pretending. If we do that, we will be a come as you are church.