

Jesus says, “whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” There’s a lot to be said about not parading your Christianity out there for the world to see. Our whole country’s dealing with the repercussions of what happens when Christians parade and get performative right now. But that same performative approach to faith is being applied to identities beyond religion, and that’s a mighty big problem. There are far too many that’re far too vocal who want to see us take our brand of Christianity behind closed doors where we can keep it a secret. Meanwhile, those same Performative Christians seek out headlines that’ll show the world just how good they are at being God’s favorites. Maybe there was a time when we needed to hide our piety at the risk of getting too puffed up, but I’m gonna do something a little dangerous here and disagree with Jesus.

See, Jesus wasn’t dealing with multiple Christianities. He wasn’t dealing with any Christianities! He was dealing with a situation where religious leaders were sometimes wonderful and faithful and sometimes hypocritical and self-serving. Not all that different from any religion at any time, for what it’s worth. But Jesus showed a different way. Jesus pointed to a move to the personal and private in what seems to be an attempt to get the self-serving back in line and highlight their hypocrisies. I suppose one could argue that we should do the same and let Performative Christians have all the rope they like while we stand back and let ‘em tie themselves up. We’ll go in private and pray while they show off to the world and the world sees their hypocrisy clear as day.

But, here’s the rub. We’ve gotten so weirdly good at going into our rooms to pray that much of the world doesn’t know a different way exists. Most people know that Performative Christianity is hypocritical to Jesus’ teachings, but they don’t know other ways are possible. As we go in our rooms to pray in secret, they are seen, heard, elected, and hypocrisy be damned, they rule in front of God and everybody. This is a delicate thing, y’all, ‘cause if we make ourselves known for our faith, we run the risk of falling into the same traps even if our conclusions land in different places. And where we’ve got our own hypocrisies, they’ll be under the spotlight, too. So I push against what Jesus said here with a bit of caution. Don’t do any of this in order to be seen or heard or profit or gain influence or rule. Do this stuff in front of God and everybody in order to remind the world what Christianity’s supposed to mean. You know this: love God, love your neighbor, seek justice, do mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Now, there’s another piece to this that desperately needs our attention right now. Today, Jesus tells us to take our sacred secret and hide away in our rooms. I know in my heart that this isn’t what Jesus intended, but I can’t help but hear an echo of that Performative and Judgemental Christianity that’s telling so many people to go into hiding. The pseudo-gospel of modern days pressures trans people into the so-called “right” rooms where they can be hidden away from the rest of us in secret.<sup>1</sup> Elementary school children are afraid to leave the imagined safety of their bedrooms and go to school for fear of being taken elsewhere in secret.<sup>2</sup> Queer people with the courage to step out of their closets find the world pushing them back in where their so-called “shameful” secret can be hidden out of view.<sup>3</sup> A German tourist has been hidden in an immigration detention

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/03/05/texas-house-bathroom-bill-transgender/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2025/02/24/trump-ice-raids-scare-students-cause-absence-schools/80051020007/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.iowapublicradio.org/state-government-news/2025-02-27/iowa-lawmakers-removes-transgender-gender-identity-civil-rights-protections>

facility for the last month simply for using her visa wrong.<sup>4</sup> College students now risk imprisonment for protesting in favor of Palestine.<sup>5</sup> The price of eggs has soared so high that the official stance of the Department of Agriculture is to just raise your own chickens.<sup>6</sup> And all this should happen in secret where no one sees your hunger, no one sees your disappeared friends, no one sees your imprisoned classmates. Sneaking in the realm of secrets is a dangerous game, and we're getting shoved deeper and deeper into our own secret places with our own secret fears and our own secret coping mechanisms. I don't think Jesus wanted us to have to hide for our own safety or to hide from helping those who are being targeted. In fact, I think he wanted just the opposite. I think he wanted us to show up for those who are persecuted.

Wait, let me change that. I don't *think* that. I *know* that. In Luke, Jesus explicitly tells us to set the oppressed free, and the Old Testament prophets are rife with instructions to fight for the oppressed. Isaiah, Amos, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, to name a few, and by the time Paul rolls around, he can't help but get on board, too. Not one "they deserve it 'cause they're poor," not a single "if they wanted to come here, they should've come here legally." We follow a man who began his life as a refugee fleeing a king driven mad by his fear of losing power. Jesus and his family hid in secret in another country, yes, but that's not a model for us to follow; it's the tragic reality of living in a world teetering on violence with power maneuvering in the background. And now our own dearly-held refugees fear for their safety, hiding in little ol' Hamilton in the hopes of not being found when the next shoe drops. We've all heard stories of underground bunkers, storm shelters, basements, even holes in the floorboards where people've hidden in secret to flee oppressions past. I know that's not what Jesus was talking about when he told us to pray in secret, but these days, I can't help but feel the pressure from those that would rather not hear from people like us hidden in those words. They might as well say, "Pray in secret, or better yet, stay in there and don't come out and don't you dare question what's going on."

Lent is upon us, and y'all know I love this season, no secret there. I love it because who we are as Christians becomes progressively more inescapable as we try to fine-tune ourselves for what waits on the other side of Holy Week. I love it because being in secret now isn't really an option. I mean, we don't announce our piety with bullhorns, but we should feel a little extra motivation to get out there and actually live like Christ. And when we do that well, we may not make the whole world safe for the oppressed again, but we can at least make it known that this place is safe for the oppressed. It always has been, but it's needed more now than any other time in recent memory. We need Hamilton to know that we are that safe place. We can't afford to let ourselves hide back here on Madison Street in secret. Those we serve can't afford that either.

So, yes, go pray in secret. Don't advertise your piety. But don't keep the results of your faith hidden away, either. However you pray, sure, *that's* not a performance. But standing up for the oppressed behind closed doors isn't gonna do much good. Y'all, standing up for the oppressed is one of the primary fruits we're supposed to be known by. Ash Wednesday is not about hiding. It's about proclaiming, and my God have we got some proclaiming to do. Pray in secret. Work where you can be seen. And come back to this core again and again and again: love God, love your neighbor, seek justice, do mercy, and in front of God and everybody, walk humbly with your God.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kpbs.org/news/border-immigration/2025/02/28/german-tourist-held-indefinitely-in-san-diego-area-immigrant-detention-facility>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/04/trump-students-college-protests-00210193>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mediaite.com/tv/trump-agriculture-boss-says-cash-strapped-americans-can-raise-their-own-chickens-to-save-on-eggs/>