

Economists call it conspicuous conservation.

It turns out that some people who are “green minded”, some people who care a lot about taking care of the planet, will go to fairly great lengths to make sure the people around them know how much they care about the planet.

In Japan there are windmills on top of buildings that actually have little electric motors in them to keep them spinning because they realized that it would look silly to have these windmills that didn’t move... so the windmills actually cost energy.

In California there are houses that have solar panels located on the shadier side of their roofs because the owners were more interested in those panels being on the street-side of their house so that everyone could see how “green” they were.

Conspicuous conservation was first written about by a pair of economists who did a study and paper on what they called *the Prius Effect*. The Toyota Prius is one of many hybrid cars available, but it is by far the most popular hybrid car. 48% of all hybrid cars purchased are Toyota Prius’.

These economists theorized that, at least in part, the Prius outsells its competition because of conspicuous conservation. A Honda Civic hybrid, or a Ford Focus hybrid looks just like a regular Civic or Focus except for that little green label on the back. The Toyota Prius, however, looks unlike any other car on the road. You don’t have to see the back of a Prius to know that it is a hybrid car.

So, their theory went, if you are invested not only in taking care of this world but broadcasting to the world what a good, conservation-minded person you are, you are more likely to buy a Toyota Prius, not another comparably-priced, fuel-efficient, but not as obvious hybrid car.

After testing their hypothesis, they discovered that, especially in greener-leaning cities (like Denver or Seattle) one driving motivator for Prius’ high sales was conspicuous conservation. Many people bought Prius’ over other hybrid cars because they wanted other people to know from a distance, “That person is a good person. They care about the planet.”

Conspicuous conservation is a subset in a larger economic theory called *signaling*. Economists have noticed a human willingness to spend large amounts of time, money, and energy for no other reason than to send certain signals out to the world, highlighting to the world around our positive attributes. We are willing to invest a lot to look good from other people’s perspective.

I find the idea of conspicuous conservation interesting and even a little humorous, and if you drive a Prius, I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m no economist, but, as a Pastor, I think economists are on to something when they talk about *signaling* – this human trend to do good things not just for the sake of doing good things, but often with the mixed-motive that the people around us will see what good people we are.

Signaling is a real thing.

Want some proof? Look at the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Economists talk about conspicuous conservation, I would call the Pharisee’s and teachers of the law’s actions in Jesus’ day conspicuous religion.

If you grew up around the Bible, you know that these two groups, Pharisees and teachers of the law, are the arch-enemies of Jesus – they are the Lex Luthor to our Superman Jesus. But I think that basic truth makes it too easy to stereotype and write off these people.

The people of Jesus day would not have thought poorly of the Pharisees or teachers of the law at all. I’m betting that if they were around today, you would love to have them as neighbors and friends and coworkers because they were good people.

At their core, they were people who took their relationship with God very seriously. They were men who loved God and by joining the group called Pharisees (people who dedicated their lives to living the way God wanted them to), or teachers of the law (people who took it a step further and dedicated their lives to teaching others God’s word), they were doing good things. In modern terms these were your every Sunday worship and Bible class, daily Bible reading church members, and the teachers in our school here.

They knew their Bible’s like the back of their hands, they studied it constantly. They looked at how God wanted them to live and they were so earnest in their desire to love God that they made a whole list of rules that would keep them from coming close to breaking one of God’s rules.

That’s what’s going on here in Mark: These guys are upset because they saw the disciples eating without washing their hands, Mark explains some of the rules these men followed: **The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.**

They knew their Bibles. They knew about Moses’ instructions in Leviticus 22 where God’s priests are instructed to ceremonially wash themselves. The Pharisees weren’t priests, but they loved God, and if God wanted priests to wash themselves, they would do that too because they would go above and beyond to show God how much they loved him.

These men had this amazing, impressive, noble attribute – they cared a lot about their relationship with God.

But, it wasn’t enough for them to care a lot about their relationship with God. They had that basic human trend that economist see today – the need to signal to everyone around them that they cared a lot about their relationship with God.

They wanted to worship God by doing exactly what God wanted them to do and then some – a good thing – but when it came down to *why* they did what they did, it wasn’t just out of love for God.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were real people, like you and I. Some of them had tender consciences, some of them wrestled with self-worth, some of them craved the praise and respect of others and they saw conspicuous religion, Phariseeism as a way to address those very common human desires. They did it to ease their consciences, because at least they were trying. They did it to feel good, because not everyone dedicates their lives to following God. They did it for praise and respect, because how nice it is when other people see what a good person I am.

But God is no fool... he knows when things are done correctly on the outside but from a mixed-motives in the heart.

Economists today see conspicuous conservation as a good thing. Who cares if some people drive Prius' out of a selfish motivation to look good. They are doing something good for the planet, so we all win from their selfishness. God, however, is not an economist. God is not impressed with lip service.

Jesus sees the conspicuous religion in these offended Pharisees and teachers of the law, their mixed motives, how it was leading them to look down on other people who weren't trying as hard as them, how it lead them to care more about traditions and what other people thought than the word of God, and he calls them out: **Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain."**

Conspicuous conservation may be fine because it is still conservation with mixed motives, but conspicuous religion, worshipping God with mixed motives, God calls that "vain", empty, meaningless.

Friends, today is a good challenge for us. It is a great opportunity to look at our lives, the things we do every day, and to ask ourselves not only what are we doing, but *why* are we doing it.

The truth is, if you spend enough time asking yourself that question (*why* do you do what you do) you'll find something pretty startling, and it might even be humorous if it weren't for what God's word says: every good thing you do is done with mixed motives.

I pitch in around the house, I sweep the floor, I change a diaper, I clean up the kitchen. Why? Because it's just the right thing to do, no mixed motives?

Nope.

I hope my kids will stop crabbing at me and give me some peace and quiet. I hope that I'll earn some brownie points with my wife so the next time a diaper needs to be changed she might do it. I hope that other people hear how much I help out around the house and think more highly of me as a husband and father. Or I do it grumbling and complaining because I have to do this now rather than something else.

I pitch in wherever I'm needed around church. I have a servant's attitude and am not above picking up snotty tissues left in the pews. I spend the first hours of every day wandering around this campus with my Bible and other theological books so I can know God's word well so I can be prepared to shepherd this congregation the way God wants. I spend a huge chunk of my week crafting sermons that are faithful to God's word and easily applied to your lives. Why? Because it's just the right thing to do, no mixed motives?

Nope.

I can't pick up a snotty tissue in the pew without looking around and wondering if people see my servant's heart. I can't learn more about God's Word without being really excited to show off to y'all how much I know about God's word. I can't preach a sermon without wondering if it makes you think more highly of me because of what a skilled preacher I am.

What about you? Can you come to church without hoping people see you here and think more highly of you? If you have a good voice, can you sing a hymn without hoping the people around you realize how good you can sing? Can you volunteer your time or give your money without hoping someone notices how dedicated you are? Can you go one day without obsessing about what other people think of you and brainstorming what you can do so they think more highly of you?

I'm betting that if you take time this week to do the same, to look at your life and ask *why* you do what you do, you will find that economists are dead on – we humans are willing to invest an incredible amount of time, money, and energy *signaling* – doing things, often good things, with a mixed, selfish motivation.

And God is no fool. The people around us may benefit when we do good things out of mixed motivation, but our God is not impressed. He calls it vain, empty, meaningless.

Why are we like this? Why can't we even do one good thing without mixed motives?

It's not just economists who are right on today. Jesus gets it.... **What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.**

And Jesus wants us to get it too – just like he wanted those Pharisees to get it.

Jesus' stern rebuke here is meant to hammer into our skulls and hearts – if you want to feel good, if you want to sooth your troubled consciences, if you want to feel loved and accepted, if you want to have a good relationship with God, you need to stop obsessing about yourself, your performance, what other people think of you, and start looking to Jesus.

Because this heart that is beating in my chest cannot fix what is wrong with me. There is this poison inside my heart (the Bible calls it sin) that infects everything I am and everything I do with conspicuous vanity, with selfish mixed motives.

And I need to see that about myself, I need to see who I really am so that I can see Jesus for who he really is.

Jesus isn't just a nice teacher here to show me how to be a better version of myself. He's not a life-coach or motivational speaker who's here to help me realize my true potential. He's not an ignorant leader who is duped and doesn't see the mixed motives behind even my best actions. He's not a pushover who doesn't care about my conspicuous vanity.

He is my Savior.

He is a God who saw me for who I really am, he saw my heart and all of the bad things that pour out of it, and he came to save me from myself. He saw that even my best actions and attributes have been tainted by the sin of my heart and he came so that I could be forgiven. He came so that all of my sins – the bad obviously ones, the mixed motive “good” ones – could be washed clean in the forgiving flood of his blood.

He died so that my conscience could be cleared – because his death was what I deserved for worshiping God in vain. He was crucified so that I could feel good – because his crucifixion means God will never punish me as my sins deserve. He was scorned and ridiculed as he hung on the cross so that my God could look at me and say, “Well done good and faithful servant,” and honor me as one of his children.

It is a good thing to see in our hearts what Jesus sees because it helps us see the heart of Jesus. This is how much he loves you. Yes, even you, mixed motives and all. He came so that conspicuously religious people, hypocrites, vain-worshippers could be saved, forgiven, set free, loved by God.

I find modern economists pretty interesting because they often have some pretty powerful insights into the human heart – capitalism and our modern economy has brought us such prosperity in part because it leverages human selfishness.

I find my Jesus' insights into the human heart to be even better because while they may not leave me feeling all warm and fuzzy about myself as they expose me for who I really am, they help me feel warm and fuzzy for all eternity about my God.

God grant that we would continue to grow in our understanding of the depths of our selfish hearts so that we can also grow in our understanding of the incredible depth of God's love for us in Jesus.

Amen.