

WAKING UP TO HYPOCRISY

Pentecost 22 Year A

Jos. 3:7-17; Ps. 107:1-7,33-37; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Mt. 23:1-12

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Christians, I think you would all agree, are not perfect. Now, maybe that may come as a shock to some but the reality is that we are not. You know it, I know it, your neighbour knows it, the person sitting next to you knows it...everybody knows it. So, why should that be a problem for us. It's a problem because there are those who think we think that we are.

The biggest criticism that is often laid upon the church from those who look at it from the outside can generally be summed up in the one word, "hypocrisy." Unfortunately, in terms of the way in which members of the church often operate in the world, those who are on the outside of the church often have a far more clearer view of Christian behaviour than those on the inside. I say "unfortunately" because often their assessment has some measure of truth in it. This opinion of hypocrisy is gained by simple observation when it's noticed that the actions of a person who professes to be a Christian, do not appear to conform with the observer's understanding (however flawed that understanding might be) of a correct expression of the Christian faith. This should come as no surprise to us, for we are all subject to the sin of hypocrisy.

Now, you know as well as I do, that observations can be misleading and there are those who may have a slightly *less* than accurate understanding of how Christians ought to behave—including some Christians. But this should not deter us from addressing the very real issue of how we should deal with the hypocrisy that *does* seem to pervade God's church—in varying degrees.

The passage that we are looking at this morning, from Matthew's account of the gospel, describes for us, a number of ways in which hypocrisy may be categorised. Far from being culturally bound to the first century, these descriptions are as accurate today as they were then.

In order to fully assess the situation, we need to address a few things up front. First of all, we need to understand what hypocrisy is and how it is expressed in the life of the church. Secondly, we need to ask ourselves why it is that Christians seem to be so prone to hypocrisy. Finally, where does the grace of God fit in to all of this?

From this passage we are able to deduce that there are generally four reasons why the church attracts the criticism of hypocrisy.

First, there is the criticism that...

I. WE DO NOT PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH. (23:3)

I'm sure, we've all heard of this one. As Jesus, speaks to his disciples and those who were following him, he first wanted to emphasise that the role of the religious leaders was a

God-given role. They sat in the seat of Moses—the chair that represented the authority and validity of the Law. It was their business to teach the people the will of God as it had been revealed to Moses. Consequently, they were the ones entrusted with the interpretation and teaching of the Scriptures. Theirs's was an important job that demanded genuine respect.

Although these men were often mistaken and although they failed to see in Jesus the fulfilment of prophecy and although they placed heavy burden on the people and so often buried the law of God, by and large, in many significant areas, they were teaching the truth.

So, it was not the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees, that was Jesus' primary concern here. Rather, it was their actions. Jesus saw in these religious leaders a double standard. Their action did not match their teaching. This is why Jesus could say to the people, "...do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do."

As human beings, we have all kinds of inclinations, both good and bad—it's part of who we are as God's creatures, marred by sin and living in a world marred by sin. Hypocrisy, in this instance is defined by covering up your true nature by saying one thing but then doing another. It's either acting out things that you, as part of the church, do not affirm or *not* acting out those things that you, as part of the church, do affirm.

Often we think of hypocrisy in terms of business ethics or acts of immorality—where we separate our secular life from our religious convictions. But hypocrisy in the church is also demonstrated when we place too close attention to insignificant things and neglect the more weightier matters—when we are more concerned about the colour of the carpet than we are about forgiving those who have hurt us—or when we are more concerned about finance than we are about reconciliation—when we point the finger at others and fail to include ourselves in that condemnation.

Sometimes, I think, Christians spend too much time defending the gospel—as if the gospel needs our defence—and not enough time putting into practice that which the gospel demands of us.

The second criticism that people often place on Christians, is that...

II. WE PLACE HEAVY BURDENS ON OTHERS, WHILE FAILING TO ACT OURSELVES.(23:4)

We have seen, earlier in Matthew's gospel, that Jesus has already made reference to this subject. With their strict and many nuances of the Law, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, placed unbearable burdens on the people. In an effort to maintain the religious purity of those, for whom they were responsible, the Scribes and Pharisees had, in effect, replaced God's Law with human tradition, depriving them of their liberty and peace of mind.

The heaviest burden of all was the fear, encouraged by these leaders, that a person's good deeds must outbalance their evil deeds, if they are to be saved. Jesus points out that, as far

as they themselves were concerned, these Scribes and Pharisees had mastered the art of avoiding these burdens. It has already been seen in the gospel how the religious leaders would, at times, show others how they could bypass obligations (e.g. the support of parents, 15:3-6, which I mentioned a few weeks ago). What they were willing, at times, to do for others, they were even more eager to do for themselves. In this way, the Scribes and Pharisees lacked sincerity and consistency.

We fall into the same trap when we are inconsistent in the way we apply Scripture to others—and especially when we come to applying it to ourselves. We exercise hypocrisy when our expectations of others—and especially our religious expectations—are not matched by our own lifestyle or our particular understanding of the gospel. Our expectations place burdens on others that we fail to bare ourselves.

The alternative to this burden, is Jesus' own yoke, which, we are told, is easy—not because it's less stringent but because it points to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The third criticism that comes our way, is that..

III. WE ACT FOR THE WRONG REASONS IN ORDER TO MAKE AN IMPRESSION UPON OTHERS. (23:5)

One of the interesting things to emerge out of first century Judaism, was the emphasis, by the religious leaders, in external signs of piety, such as phylacteries and prayer shawls. This was not because they were hypocrites, interested only in externals, but because they wanted these things to be distinctive markers of God's holy people, living in a pluralistic society.

Phylacteries, for those who don't know, were small leather boxes that contained portions of the Torah. These were strapped to the forehead and the left arm (to be close to the heart) during the recitation of prayers. The fringes were commanded as part of the dress of every Israelite and understood in the same way as the tassels attached to the prayer shawl. Both of these were used as reminders to observe God's Law out of gratitude for his marvellous deeds.

Jesus criticised the religious leaders, not because of these trappings *per se*, but because they made the straps that they used to tie on their phylacteries wider than they needed to be and their fringes, longer than they needed to be—all of which was designed to make them stand out and so draw attention to their own importance. Jesus also criticised them for vying for the seats of greatest honour at banquets and in the synagogue, and for wanting to be called Rabbi or teacher—also as a mark of respect and honour. What they were looking for, what they coveted, was a demonstration of respect—a public recognition of their prominence and importance.

Christians, unfortunately, are not immune to such desires. Christian piety can often subside into self-centred pride. Doing things for the wrong motives or to be noticed by

others, is nothing more than idolatry. Instead of serving, as an act of worship towards God, our serving becomes an act of worship to ourselves.

Finally, and as a consequence, we attract the criticism of Hypocrisy because...

IV. WE MISUNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF CHRIST'S MINISTRY. (23:11-12)

For some, ministry is not seen so much as an opportunity for service, but as a sphere of management or a chance to gain recognition.

The church, however, does not exist for our benefit alone. It has been said that the church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of non-members. Ministry, as Jesus points out, must be carried out in an attitude of genuine humility—not looking for gain or advantage or popularity. This goes for whether you are in paid ministry, on the Church Council, or engage in any other task or responsibility within or outside of the church. Instead, true service is selfless and self-giving. The church is not just another organisation. The church exists, not for its own sake, but for the sake of others and for the glorification of Christ. Christ's example of servant leadership, stands as the benchmark for our attitude to ministry.

CONCLUSION

The attitudes that lay behind the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees, can be summed up by saying that they *lacked sincerity, lacked sympathy and lacked humility*. When we come to address the situation of hypocrisy in the church, we have to realise that those outside the church have a much higher expectation of the behaviour of those inside the church, than they do of the rest of society in general. When a Christian displays hypocrisy, therefore, it is more noticeable.

So, when we get to the end of all this, we have to ask ourselves, as Professor Julius Sumner Miller was so fond of asking, "Why is it so?" Why is it that Christians so often fall into the trap of hypocrisy? One of the reasons, I believe, is that we care too much for the modern cultural idol of self-esteem. We like to be acknowledged at social gatherings, we like to be greeted in the market place. It's part of being human. We are social creatures and we all like to be known and liked. We want to be accepted by others, to be insiders, to belong. When we are ignored, self-esteem takes a dive.

Hypocrisy, then, is really an attempt to justify ourselves in front of others. It's our way of gaining approval. It is our way of attempting to put forward a positive image of ourselves, when we do not live up to our own religious convictions. The presence of hypocrisy, however, is the evidence of a much deeper misunderstanding of the nature of grace, for a true knowledge of the grace of God removes the necessity of self-justification. When we seek approval from people, we will always suffer the burden of expectations, but when we realise that God approves of us, just the way we are, we are freed from this burden and are able to live in the freedom that God's mercy and forgiveness gives us.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.