

Bringing Jesus to Your World

When Seekers Look for Jesus But Find Hypocrites Instead

Luke 11:37-54

Once I was talking with a man who needed the Lord. I told him about the wonderful grace of Jesus. Jesus' love, his compassion, his sacrifice, his offer of forgiveness, his resurrection, his call to follow him. I concluded, "Wouldn't you want to become a Christian?" I'll never forget his response. "I want to follow Christ. But I don't want to become a Christian."

Pursing what he meant by this statement, I learned he had been exposed to some examples of people who claimed to be followers of Christ, but were hypocrites. It is a shame, isn't it, when seekers look for Jesus, but find hypocrites instead.

Jesus reserved his harshest words, not for thieves, or prostitutes but to a segment among the religious folks who he identified as hypocrites. Jesus is committed to exposing people who claim to represent God and his ways, while not living out what they claim to be.

Perhaps the most frightening fact about the Pharisees was they were the group of people in the Gospels most closely resembling us Evangelical Christians. As far as the fundamentals are concerned, the Pharisees believed in nearly everything we do. They believed in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. They believed in the supernatural, in Satan, angels, heaven and hell, and the resurrection of the dead. And they were commendably zealous about what they believed. But sincerity is not enough, when it is mixed with hypocrisy. The issues that Jesus exposes are still relevant to us today because they apply specifically to those who hold a conservative theological viewpoint. In pursuit of the Truth and the attempt to carry out the will of God, we can get caught up in spirit of self-righteousness in which the label "hypocrite" might apply not just to the Pharisees of the First Century, but also to us Christians of the Twenty-First Century.

Are you able and willing to look honestly at yourself? It takes courage and humility to be like the disciples who—when told by Jesus that one of them would betray him—were willing to sincerely ask, "Lord, is it I?" Do you have the courage and humility today to ask, "Do I have this disease of hypocrititus?"

Reading: Luke 11:37-54

The setting of this section is a meal and the catalyst is Jesus' failure to wash his hands for eating. "*When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.*" (Luke 11:37-38)

This washing of hands had nothing to do with hygiene; tradition-imposed, ceremonial cleanliness was the issue. There was nothing in the Law of Moses that required this washing of hands before a meal. It was a tradition of the Pharisees that they had elevated as equal to Scripture.

This observation alerts us to the first symptom of hypocrititus:

A hypocrite...

1. Elevates tradition as equal to the Word of God.

Ceremonial washing was not Scriptural, but when Jesus didn't participate in their traditional ceremonies, the Pharisee was aghast. Sometimes we let traditions get entrenched to such an extent that we find it difficult to violate them, or allow others to do so.

Two weeks ago I attended the Saturday evening service. Even though I had "been to church" and heard the sermon from Pastor David, I felt a compulsion to return again Sunday morning. I had to ask myself, "Why?" The main reason I was coming was to be around you people, especially before and after the worship service. To hear how you're doing, to be available to answer questions about ministry with Life Groups and children. But I also had to admit there was a little part of my thinking that was saying, "You haven't really been to church unless you've been there on Sunday morning." To the extent I was thinking that way, I was elevating tradition to be on par with the Word of God. God's Word says we are to meet together to worship regularly, "not to forsake the assembly of ourselves together". It does not prescribe where, when, or how. Missionaries who export the message of Christ to cross-cultural settings must always guard against carrying the liberating message of Christianity on the stifling cart of American-style churchianity.

2. Is concerned with appearance instead of reality.

Referring back to our text, in verse 39-41 Jesus, knowing their thoughts about the traditionally-imposed ceremonial washing, responded, "*Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor and everything will be clean for you.*" (11:39-41)

Jesus differs from Pharisees by seeing the inside as more important than the outside, the heart as more important than appearances. Jesus says they are only concerned with cleaning the outside of the cup and dish, but inside there is filth. When the condition of the inside doesn't match the portrayal on the outside, we are set up for the classic scenario of hypocrisy. And it is devastating for those who truly want to know and follow Christ to be in that land of tension. To know your profession is a sham; that you're serving Christ in the efforts of the flesh because His Holy Spirit isn't in control.

What is a person to do? When a friend of mine realized his insides (what he was doing in secret) did not match his outsides (what he was portraying to his friends and family in the church), he considered he had three options:

1. He could continue the sham, the hypocrisy, with the fear of discovery and internal loathing that come with it.
2. He could opt to reject his Christian faith and give himself totally to the world, the flesh, and the devil. But he knew Christianity is based on truth, that there is a judgment to come, and that he really wanted to love Jesus.
3. He could come clean. He could step out of the shadows of hiding and into the light by admitting his sin and seeking accountability.

There was a fourth option, but he had already tried that and found it had not worked.

4. He could privately repent, ask forgiveness, and try to do better. This last option he had tried many times, but failed. For him, this sin had become so entrenched and addictive that battling it alone was a failing option.

My friend decided his sin needed to be brought out in the light of day so others could stand with him against it. Fortunately, he found the leadership of his church to be willing to walk with him through months of recovery, prayerful support, and watchful accountability. Today my friend is being restored to a place in public ministry again, but a ministry in which his public persona is the same as his private world.

If you have those areas of secret darkness, or hidden sin, you have the same four options. If you have not been able to decisively deal with your sin privately, you may have found your options are now really only three. I pray and encourage you to opt for #3, that is, to come clean by stepping into the light of confession with some trustworthy Christian friends.

Jesus now issues a series of “woes” hitting head-on the wrong priorities of the Pharisees (vs. 42-45) and Scribes (vs. 46-52). In doing so, he describes six additional symptoms of hypocritus.

3. Majors on the minors and minors on the majors.

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.” (11:42)

The Pharisees tithed, and that is good. Jesus commends their tithing. But the Pharisees had made this sharing of the material blessings God had given them into a ridiculous game of counting every herb in the garden. But while cultivating their herb garden from which they tithed, they had forgotten to cultivate their hearts to grow justice toward people and love toward God. In essence, they had majored on the minor and minored on the major.

Although these words are addressed to a religious group that no longer exists, the spiritual errors they made are still with us. We have our own standards of legalism. We become legalist when we become single-issue people. The issues may vary. “What version of the Bible do you read? In your prophetic chart on end times eschatology, are you pre-trib or post-trib or (or the one we like best) no-trib? Are you a Republican or a Democrat? Do you home school, do you send your kids to Christian school or do you send your kids to be missionaries in the public school? Are you a vegetarian, cart-carrying member of PETA or a steak-loving meat eater?” Whatever the issues are—if we use them to define whether person is spiritual or not—we are guilty of majoring on the minors.

What God is really concerned with is not the minor issues of our debate, but rather the weighty place we give to justice for our fellow man and our love for God.

4. Is preoccupied with being noticed.

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” (11:43)

Unlike many evangelical churches in which the most coveted seats are in the back row, in the Synagogue the desired seats were those in the front. In fact they were not only in the front they were facing the congregation, like being seated on the platform as a revered teacher or authority.

Hypocrites do what they do to be seen and notice by others. Are your acts of service to Christ done to be seen by men? Or are you satisfied to serve unnoticed? If only God knows of your service, is that sufficient for you?

Last week I found a dirty, sauce-encrusted dish left in the staff kitchen sink. Someone had just forgotten to wash it. I didn’t mind taking 60 seconds to scrub it myself. But as soon as I was finished with this minor service rendered, I started to hope someone would find out I had done it. Doing it “as unto Christ” was not enough for me. My “servant-heartedness” is so weak.

5. Makes people worse rather than better.

“Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.” (11:44)

According to the Law of Moses, Jews had to be careful about ceremonial defilement from coming into contact with dead bodies. “Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days.” (Number 19:16). So they made sure that graves were carefully marked. But the Pharisees were like “unmarked graves” that did not look like graves at all.

Will people of the world be better off if they were to brush up against us, becoming like us? Or would they become hypocrites too, acting righteous on the outside while being full of rotting bodies on the inside? You see, being a Christian does not mean being perfect and Christ-like all the time. Avoiding hypocrisy simply means when we do sin, we own up to it. We acknowledge it and apologize. Don't you agree, that the best witness to seekers may not be the Christian who appears to have it all together, but rather the one who doesn't and admits it?

6. Makes God's Word a burden instead of a blessing.

One of the experts in the law answered him, 'Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.' When Jesus addresses "experts in the law", sometimes translated as "the lawyers," we need to realize they are not "lawyers" as we understand the term today. They are the theologians, the seminary professors, the authors of the commentaries, the experts on Scripture. Jesus replied, 'And you experts in the law, woe to you because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.' (11:45-46)

Jesus creates a mental image here. Imagine a person wanting to walk the path of godly living. They have a 50 pound backpack on, trying to follow the laws of God. The Scribes come along and, instead of giving them encouragement and help in obeying, they pile extra rocks inside the pack so that now it weighs 75 pounds.

Jesus accuses them of taking all the joy out of living for God and making serving God a burden. Living for God and serving Him is a joy and blessing. When David spoke of the law of the Lord in Psalm 19 he described it as a delight, "sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb, moreover by them Thy servant is warned and in keeping them there is great reward." (Ps. 19:10-11). Jesus invites us to follow his paths: "Come unto me all you are labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light." Following Jesus' teaching is not easy, but it is not a burden. The burden of the Pharisees loaded on guilt, but the blessing of Jesus results in grace.

7. Erects monuments to the past, but resists God's work in the present.

"Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all." (11:47-51)

These experts in the law gave an outward show of reverence to the prophets of the past by decorating the tombs of the prophets, but they resisted God's present work in the greatest of all prophets, God's own son, who walked among them.

Our church has a great heritage. Whereas some churches have no history to look back upon and some churches have a history that is mostly full of fights and failures, Central Bible has a legacy in which there were "the good old days." We can look back and see how faithful God has been, working through past ministries and past leaders.

But God has not called us to sit down and rest upon monuments erected to the past, but rather to move forward as God works again in the present, moving us into the future. Let's not resist what God wants to do now by looking over our shoulder saying, "Dr. Mitchell never did it that way." No, he didn't. But John G. Mitchell had a heart for the lost and a love for the Savior. So, if he were here today as a young pastor, he would not be looking back, but reaching forward to find new initiatives to bring the love of the Savior to the world of the lost.

8. Hinders seekers from finding God.

"Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering." (11:52)

Jesus condemns the 'experts of the law' for being the exact opposite of what they think they are. They believe that they possess the key of knowledge, but in fact they have become an obstacle to the truth.

Do you remember the man I told you about at the beginning of my talk, the man who said he would like to follow Christ, but did not want to become a Christian? He didn't want to become a Christian because he did not want to become like his perception of us. Is his perception accurate?

It is easy to see the symptoms of hypocrititus in the lives of others, but not nearly as easy to see them in our own lives. Consider how this message might apply—not to someone else—but to you as you hear what the Lord who knows all is saying to your heart! Let's review the symptoms of hypocrisy to see if you might be coming down with the disease.

A hypocrite...

- 1. Elevates tradition as equal to the Word of God.**
- 2. Is concerned with appearance instead of reality.**
- 3. Majors on the minors and minors on the majors.**
- 4. Is preoccupied with being noticed.**
- 5. Makes people worse rather than better.**
- 6. Makes God's Word a burden instead of a blessing.**
- 7. Erects monuments to the past, but resists God's work in the present.**
- 8. Hinders seekers from finding God.**

THE RESPONSE

“When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.” (11:53-54)

When faced with the truth of God’s word we are always faced with one of two choices: we can believe and repent, or we can become angry and reject the truth. Here the religious leaders reached a point of no return. They crossed the invisible line from which there was no turning back. I don’t think they realized they had just hardened their heart for the last time. I wonder if anyone does? How many times has the Lord touched your heart, how many times have you felt Him drawing you, but you resisted. The next time you heard the truth it didn’t hurt so bad, the drawing was not as strong. Quick, if the Lord has tenderized your heart today, allow him to change your path to lead to Him, your defenses to lay bare before him; your hypocrisy to be admitted and rejected.

Prayer: A Psalm of Single Mindedness

Lord of reality make me real
not plastic, synthetic, pretend, phony, an actor playing a part, hypocrite.

I don’t want to keep a prayer list, but to pray,
not to agonize to find your will, but to obey what I already know.

Not to argue theories of inspiration, but submit to your word.
I don’t want to explain the difference between eros and philo and agape, but actually to love.

I don’t want to sing as if I mean it. I want to mean it.
I don’t want to tell like it is, but to be it like you want it.

I don’t want to tell others how to do it, but to do it.
I don’t want to have to be right, but to admit it when I am wrong.

[adapted from Joseph Bayly. *Psalms of My Life.*]