

June 20 **Where Hypocrisy Flourishes** **Matt. 21:28-31; Mark 7:1-7**

Where Skeptics Never Go and Why is the title of this series and I could have titled this sermon, “where the pot calls the kettle black.” We are examining and confessing the barriers we erect between unbelievers and the gospel. Skeptics will not go where they see, hear or feel religious hypocrisy.

Kristen had a friend over on Friday and they watched the movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. One bit of dialogue caught my attention. Pirate Jack Sparrow’s crew commandeered the pirate ship called the Black Pearl, whose crew was attacking another ship. As the “good pirates” slip away, two enemy pirates on the other ship notice that the Black Pearl is moving. The first pirate says: *Our ship's sailing away! Is it supposed to be doing that?* The other pirate says: *They're stealing our ship!* To which the first responds ...**BLOODY PIRATES!**

Reminds me of the reply we gave to childhood taunts: ***it takes one to know one!***

On the show *Frasier* a hospital patient is obsessively concerned about germs so he asks his doctor, a character named Niles: *So, you don't think I have a phobia, doctor?* Niles says, *Not at all; simply a healthy understanding of personal hygiene.* Then he hands the patient a business card and says, *Now, here is the number of the man who cleans my telephone.*

In the comic strip, Dilbert, we find the Pointy Haired Boss handing back a paper to Alice the explosive employee. He says, *Thanks, hun.* Alice turns red and says, ***Hon!? YOU SEXIST CREEP! I SHALL BURN DOWN YOUR VILLAGE AND MAKE SLAVES OF YOUR CHILDREN!*** To which the pointy haired boss says, *Hun is short for 'Attila the Hun'. Everyone calls you that.* And Alice says, *That seems a bit harsh.*

Hypocrisy gets lots of laughs...except in real life.

Last week, we spoke about how judgment and finger-pointing by Christians is such a problem for unbelievers. Probably an even bigger barrier is **hypocrisy**. To understand this reaction, simply think of the hypocrisy you see in politics today, such as “members on the other side of the aisle are playing politics.” *Takes one to know one.*

Hypocrisy kills the trust necessary for sharing the gospel. You wouldn’t go to a doctor who had lost his license and neither will the skeptic go to hypocrites in their search for meaning in life.

Christians get lumped together, so when skeptics read about clergy abuse or the fall of a TV preacher who has been caught doing the very thing that he condemned; or the young Texas pastor who murdered his wife to be with his mistress, they write us off; along with our message.

Christian or church hypocrisy is the number one reason many reject Christianity and the church. It’s the number one reason I hear from people who were but no longer are involved with a congregation. Yes, I know that hypocrisy isn’t just a Christian or religious problem. It runs through all humanity. But it’s always easier to see the hypocrisy in others and be blind to our own. I remember swatting one of my children on the behind and then saying to them sternly, ***we do NOT hit!***

In the Greek, the word is **hupocritēs** and in Greek civilization the word described a **stage actor**; someone who played one kind of person on stage but was a very different person off stage. The gospel writers used this word to communicate what Jesus said about religious leaders who acted the part of true righteousness while on the public stage but were in actuality *white-washed tombs*; a phrase that means pristine on the outside; dead on the inside. James called such people “*doubled minded*,” trying to live two contradictory lives.

Nathaniel Hawthorne warned, *No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.*

Jesus addressed this plague of pretense among the righteous leaders of his day. He quoted the prophet Isaiah who said, ***This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me...*** Isaiah was speaking to us when we sing *I need thee every hour,*

but live as though we need everything else. He was speaking to those who sing to God, *melt me, mold me, fill me, use me*; but then live as they choose. There is a huge difference between being people OF the Book and people who read the Book.

The parable of the two sons we read earlier from Matthew 21 is about one son who says he will obey his father but does not and another son who does not say he will obey his father but does. At the end of the day, it's not what we say but what we do that identifies us as sons and daughters of God. Better to give the wrong answer but do the right thing than give the right answer and do the wrong thing. Here's a novel idea. What if we learned the right thing to do and actually did the same.

In our other reading, Mark 7, Jesus gave another angle on religious hypocrisy using the Pharisees as an illustration. Jesus used this term *hypocritēs* to describe religious leaders who judged their righteousness and other's only by how well they kept laws, rituals and traditions. The Pharisees did a great job of doing the things they believed God required; down to the minutia.

The hypocrisy of the Pharisees was not so much between what they said and did. It was between what they did and what God actually desired from them; between their own sense of righteousness and God's righteousness. God does not want good deeds without faith or without heart. Following a list of rules is not the same thing as loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Clearly, Isaiah and Jesus saw hypocrisy as a false or superficial self-righteousness. Jesus pointed to it in a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed thus: *'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get...*In contrast, the tax collector prayed *God have mercy on me a sinner*. And Jesus said it was this sinner who went away justified before God, not the Pharisee.

Then Jesus said, *whoever exalts himself will be humbled*; or to paraphrase, *those who seek to show others they are more righteous than they are will be shown to be what they are: counterfeits; hypocrites*. Hypocrisy is unsustainable. Just ask any one of a number of men who have tried to live with two wives and two families in separate towns. It doesn't work for long and you get humbled along the way.

The book I mentioned last week about what young non-Christians think of us includes some interesting perspectives from these unbelievers. The one that slapped me across the face was *"Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus."* It's not just the personal gap of words and actions that is a stumbling block for unbelievers, but the gap between what they read in the New Testament and what they see in modern Christianity. Here was a young adult who knew something about Jesus, perhaps had even studied the Bible and saw the incongruity between who Jesus was and how his followers live today. And somewhere in our hearts, we think he is probably right.

We should be aware that many skeptics we encounter will have good knowledge about the Bible and therefore the gaps between our profession and our practices. One skeptic wrote in his blog, *Christians, they love to talk about how loving, dutiful and compassionate they are, yet I have yet to meet ONE who does not practice hypocrisy to the highest degree. Their willful ignorance of the Bible combined with their two faced idealism to preach it, has made us sick... The problem with their approach lies not only in...failure to practice what they preach, but an equally pronounced tendency to ignore what the Bible itself, preaches. Christians practice what can only be described as "selective morality."*

In another book, I read an email from a high school skeptic that had been sent to a Christian professor of history. I think you'll find this paragraph telling: *In my stupid attempt to become popular I started going to Young Life my sophomore year. I went so I could meet all the cool kids because they went. After about two months of Young Life I realized that most of the kids who went*

were also the kids who got drunk and high on the weekend. Then they came and put on their good religious façade in an attempt to make it seem that Young Life had a real effect on them. Of course, some skeptic could say the same about any Christian group or church. The takeaway is THEY NOTICE!

An interesting study on American attitudes toward hypocrisy was published last year. The research found that our negative reaction to hypocrisy is not simply about the gap between words and deeds, but about which comes first; words or deeds. The author wrote; *if you say you're going to join the health club to lose some weight, but then instead of going you eat pizza every day and gain 5 pounds, the general public will see you as a hypocrite of the first order. However, if you gain 5 pounds by eating pizza for a week and then say you're going to join the health club to lose weight, the public sees you in a positive light.*

If we are proud of our moral membership in our spiritual health club but consume what is poisonous to that life, we are hypocrites of the first order. When we want others to believe that our faith is deep and strong, maybe even superior; when we put our piety on parade with extra spiritual language or clichés for every situation; when we attend church so that our clients think we are good, honest and upstanding citizens; when we play to our human audience rather than relate honestly to them and to God; the public has no grace for us.

However, if we are first sinners; broken or stumbling; making mistakes in life, but speak about our commitment to seek the help of God to live a better life, instead of skepticism, we actually get some grace from those who struggle likewise. We see the same thing in Jesus who rebuked those who played the part of the righteous but had mercy and grace on sinners who wanted to live a meaningful life.

One step we could take to address our sins of hypocrisy would be to first profess our sinfulness and only then share our hope in the grace and salvation of God. In this way, we do not begin on our high horses.

The cure for our hypocrisy is not that we become perfect, but that we become honest. We must become as honest about our failures and spiritual needs as members of AA. We cannot act in church like we have risen above sin when we too are sinners striving to live up to the standards of Jesus. We must exhibit humility among ourselves and with our unbelieving friends. We cannot rest on our laurels; self-satisfied about our righteousness or salvation. We are a community constantly in need of God's grace, just like the rest of humanity.

Tolstoy wrote, *Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself.* We are to be a confessional people and humility opens doors to unbelievers.

Several years ago, this church suffered the pain and fallout of a major pastoral failure. If you were here then, you saw the personal and relational pain that resulted. You saw trust become collateral damage. We therefore have all the understanding and motive we need to make sure we don't inflict the same upon the unbelieving community around us. Hypocrisy hurts everyone.

May the light of Christ and his word shine upon us, revealing our duplicity and leading us to honesty and humility.