

Hypocrites

Matthew 23:13-28

March 16, 2014

Like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside, but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside. On the outside, appearing good, but inside, full of hypocrisy and sins.

Is that us?

In January 2008, LifeWay Research, based in Nashville, published the results of a survey of 1,402 unchurched Americans, “adults who had not attended a religious service at a church, synagogue, or mosque in the previous six months.” Interestingly, seventy-two percent of these folks who want nothing to do with church say they believe in God, in some form or other, and seventy-one percent of them believe that Jesus “makes a positive difference in a person’s life.” Seventy-eight percent say “they would enjoy an honest conversation with a friend about religious and spiritual beliefs, even if they disagreed with [that] friend.” Do you hear that? More than three-quarters of your friends who don’t go to church would be open to and would even enjoy talking with you about what you believe!

But seventy-two percent of the men and women surveyed say that the church is full of hypocrites, full of people who “criticize others for doing the same things they do themselves.” Do you suppose that’s why they’re not in church?

Commenting on a blog post written by Marc5Solas, a woman named Meg said:

I left the [church] for the simple reason that I could no longer, in good conscience, belong to an organization that was so completely intolerant and hypocritical. For a religion that is supposed to be based on radical love I find that 90 Percent of the Christians I meet to be extremely judgmental black and white thinkers.

Is it true? Are they right? Are we a bunch of hypocrites?

Let’s find out. I want you to stand up, right now, if you are not a hypocrite, if you can honestly say, “I am entirely what I appear to be.” Stand up and show yourself, right now, if you are as good on the inside as you appear to be on the outside, if your actions are completely in tune with your words. Stand up!

They're right, aren't they? The church is full of hypocrites. So should we get up now and go home? Shutter the doors of the church? Stop pretending? Stop trying to fool everybody? Stop trying to fool ourselves? Because we are all liars and hypocrites?

Yes! Some churches should shutter their doors! But this church? Our church? Let me ask you -- and be honest! -- why are you here? Are you here to parade your goodness, to show the world or whoever might care, that you are a person of high moral character, of surpassing virtue? Or are you here because you are hungry and thirsty?

Of course, we are hypocrites! Of course, the church is full of hypocrites. It's such an easy target. Because anyone who wants to be better than they are, anyone who cares deeply and aims high, anyone who believes in justice and mercy and righteousness and tries to be just, to be merciful, to be good, will fall short. We will fall short even of our own expectations, and we will surely fall short of God's. Hypocrites? For sure!

But, maybe, we need to reframe the question. Hypocrisy -- toxic hypocrisy, lethal hypocrisy, hypocrisy that kills the spirit, your own spirit and maybe too the spirits of those around you -- deadly hypocrisy is rooted in pride. It's all about showing yourself, proving yourself, justifying yourself, being self-righteous. But humility changes everything. If you know you are a hypocrite and if you admit you are a hypocrite, maybe you really aren't a hypocrite.

Is the church full of hypocrites? Surely it is. But am I, are you, are we, like whitewashed tombs which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside? I pray not!

Jesus really let the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees have it. Does his vitriol, his harsh words, surprise you? Why is he so hard on them? Because they are teachers! Because they are the guides on whom everybody else depends to show them the way, to point them the way, toward God, toward righteousness, toward a life that is meaningful, toward a life that is good, toward eternal life.

Their job is to bring people to God, but, instead, they are turning people away and shutting people out. They are meant to be servants, servants of God's people, seeking and promoting the spiritual and physical well-being of the people God loves, but, instead, they are seeking and promoting their own well-being. It's all about what it's always all about -- power and control. It's all about setting the terms, controlling the variables, justifying themselves, proving themselves in the eyes of other people, in their own eyes, and ... in the eyes of God?

That's what you would think they would care most about, proving themselves to God, but Jesus' curious discussion about vows calls even that into question. Jesus points out that in making precise rules about the conditions that make a vow binding or not, about the settings make a promise holy or not, they have forgotten the meaning of holiness in the first place.

They have forgotten that it is not the thing that is holy, but the One who sets it apart. They have forgotten that they are not bound to keep their word by a sacred object, but by a holy God. They have made up their own rules and left God out! They have forgotten God.

If they did remember God, if they were palpably aware of the presence of the holy God all around them, not just in the Temple, not just in front of the altar, they -- and we -- would surely tremble! We would be like the tax collector in Jesus' story who beat his breast and prayed, "God, have pity on me, a sinner!," acknowledging our weakness, admitting our frailty, confessing our sins ... being honest.

The antidote to hypocrisy is honesty. And it starts with God. It starts with being honest with God. When we are honest with God, then we are not afraid to be honest with ourselves. And when we are honest with God and with ourselves, we are free to be honest with other people.

Honesty -- what a compelling witness! You don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to justify yourself. Just be honest.

Are you sometimes in doubt?

Are you sometimes afraid?

Are you sometimes in distress?

Are you sometimes stressed out?

Are you sometimes frustrated and confused?

Are you sometimes guilty?

Yes, you are sometimes guilty ... but does God forgive?

Yes, you are sometimes frustrated and confused ... but does God point the way?

Yes, you are sometimes stressed out, burned out ... but does God renew your strength?

Yes, you are sometimes in distress ... but does God comfort you?

Yes, you are sometimes afraid ... but does the love of God give you courage?

Yes, you are sometimes in doubt ... but, tell me, honestly, do you believe?

What a compelling witness! What a compelling witness you can offer, when you are honest, to all those friends who would enjoy talking with you about what you believe. What a compelling witness we can offer to all the people who are hungry and thirsty like us, who will be ready to join us, as they are, because we have been honest about who we are.

Jesus was so hard on the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, because they were the gatekeepers of the kingdom of heaven. We are the gatekeepers of the kingdom of heaven! Unlock the gates! Throw the doors open wide! Tell everybody to go on in! Come on! Let's go!