

I Believe in God, but...
"Christians are Hypocrites"

May 5, 2019

Focus: Sometimes when we are trying to do the right thing, we end up going about it the wrong way and being hypocritical. This causes people not to want to be like us.

What do we want people to learn: There are a lot of legitimate reasons why people see hypocrisy in Christians. Though we will never be perfect, we can help people to see Jesus when we live a more genuine life.

What do we want people to do: Look at their lives and areas where they might be living hypocritically and hurting their witness.

During this series we are looking at some of the things that we often hear from non-Christians about Christianity. Last week Pastor Dave talked about how there are a lot of people who believe in God, but they don't like organized religion. We talked about some of the ways that organized religion has hurt people in the past and about how we need to be sure that we are living out our faith as a relationship with the living God together to positively impact the world.

Today we are going to take a look at another thing that we often hear from people; *I believe in God, but Christians are hypocrites*. I know, that stings a little, but it stings a little because it is true. If it wasn't at least a little bit true we could just brush it off, but we can't just brush it off. It hurts because it is true and if it is true then it means that we have to take some responsibility for it. The church has a long history of being hypocritical, and that history isn't all old history.

We can look back in history and see that there were times when the church was leading the way in causing harm to other people. The Crusades are an easy one that comes to mind, right? The church used terrorism to take over lands occupied by other people of other religions for the purpose of expanding a political kingdom under the shadow of Christianity. The church allowed itself to be used as a tool for political gain. The church supported and condoned slavery in America for hundreds of years; you can go into the archives today and find countless sermons preached in churches across this country from the time of slavery that would make your stomach turn.

In case we think that this is just something that happened in the ancient past, today as we speak we have churches that are married to a political cause holding services, churches that won't let women speak, churches that won't do an interracial wedding service and churches that preach that it is better to stay in an abusive marriage than get a divorce! The hypocrisy in the church isn't just a historical issue, it is also a current issue.

While these are bigger picture church hypocrisies, we can all be hypocrites individually too. There isn't a person in this room, myself included, who doesn't do things hypocritically at times. How many of us act the same way that we do outside of these walls as we do when we are in this building? Would our spouses say we act the same? Our kids? Our co-workers? Does the poor family over on the other side of town know you to be the same person you claim to be here on Sunday morning when they need help during the week? Do they know me as the same person?

In our scripture reading today we saw Jesus giving it to the religious people – really letting them have it for their hypocrisy. These were the church people; the folks that were there every time the doors were opened. They wore Christian T-shirts, posted the “Verse of the Day” on their social media every day and were adamant to only listen to Word FM and to check Focus on the Family’s review before seeing any movie. They could list off a bunch of verses on almost any subject and were very quick to tell people what behaviors they needed to change in order to be a “real” Christian. Jesus, as we saw, wasn’t having any of that. They knew a lot of things – but they didn’t understand anything. They were really good at believing and very bad at applying.

Hypocrites profess to believe but aren’t very good at applying.

One of the things that keeps a lot of people out of the church is that we tend to be very good about saying what we believe and very bad at living it out in our lives. We say one thing with our lips and we do another thing with our lives. We know about the things that God is calling us to do with our lives but we have a really hard time actually doing them. We say we want to be one thing, but when push comes to shove, we are another thing.

I once heard about a church just outside of Philadelphia in the suburbs that had a sign in the front that read “Come as you are. All are welcome” in the front lawn. A homeless alcoholic man who was well known in the town showed up one Sunday morning. He was dirty and stinky and looked terrible. One of the women in the church walked up to him and said “You can’t be in here like that. This is a church!” The man left, confused because the sign out front said that he would be welcomed just as he was, but in reality the people of the church didn’t want him like he was. What they believed and how they applied it were not the same. They said one thing and they did another – and that is the definition of hypocrisy.

When Jesus was talking to these church people and calling them out for their hypocrisy He wasn’t just talking about their corporate hypocrisy – the things the church did as a unit that was hypocritical. He was also talking to the individual people about what they were doing in their lives that was hypocritical; in their own lives what were they doing that was contrary to what they said they were doing? We have all been there and we are all still there.

None of us are perfect in this, but that is also not an excuse. There is a difference between a reason and an excuse. A reason is the “why” we did something, and sometimes the reason isn’t a good one. We can understand that our reasoning for an action was not right and do better. An excuse is when we try to dismiss our behaviors as something that is not actually our fault. Do you see the difference? We can have a reason we did something wrong and learn that our process for making that decision may have been flawed and accept responsibility. An excuse shifts the responsibility for our behavior to something other than ourselves. Let’s say that I had a long, hard day at work and when I come home I am rude to my kids. I choose to either say the reason I was rude was because I took out my frustration from work on my kids and that was wrong of me, or I can choose to say that I was mean with them because I was frustrated from work – that is an excuse. The excuse says that it is not really my fault I was mean to the kids because I was frustrated from work, it is work’s fault not mine! The reason recognizes that I am responsible for allowing my frustration from work to bleed over into how I treated my kids and that is both not right and completely my fault.

So why that little lesson on reason vs excuse? It is because often our fallback position as Christians when people say that they believe in God but Christians are hypocrites is to excuse the reality of the statement instead of understanding the reason for it. Let me repeat that – when people say that Christians are hypocrites we often excuse the reality of the statement instead of understanding the reason for it.

How many of us have heard somebody respond to the statement about the church being full of hypocrites with something like this: *"Well, it is true. We are all hypocrites, so you can come because we always have space for one more!"* or some variation of this idea. While that statement might make us, as Christians, feel better the reality is that it does nothing to make that person feel any better about coming to church. That statement is an excuse that makes us feel better, not a reason that brings them any closer to Jesus – and that is supposed to be our goal, right? To help bring people closer to Jesus.

We can choose to excuse the hypocritical behavior of the church and of ourselves as Christians, or we can choose to understand the reasons that people see us that way. We don't like to hear it, but perception is reality. It might not even be fair, but it is true! Just this past month new data came out about the religious affiliation of Americans and for the first time ever the largest group in the survey was "none". It wasn't Catholics or Evangelicals anymore, it was the group of people that don't want anything to do with anybody.

When we dig a little deeper into those numbers and then look at other surveys out there we see that one of the leading causes of this is the hypocrisy of the church – we say one thing and we do another! I call these things self-inflicted wounds. It is easy to look at the decline of the church in America and blame it on something other than the church – but that is one of those excuses that dismisses our own responsibilities. If the church was living out what we preach then it would be a place that a pregnant teenager runs to for help and comfort and care instead of a place that they run away from ashamed to ever show their face again. I have a friend who was physically abused by her husband for years and every time she went to the pastor for help he told her to pray for her husband and stand by him because God hates divorce. For almost a decade she was abused and when the abuse began to include their small children she went against the pastors advice and left with her kids. She was told to never set foot in that church again. If you want to really have your stomach turn, go on Twitter and type in "#ChurchToo" and you will find tens of thousands of stories of how the church was used to cover up sexual abuse of children and women in America in the past 30 years.

All of these self-inflicted, hypocritical wounds lead to one major problem: they make people believe that Christianity doesn't work.

Hypocrites make people believe that Christianity doesn't really work.

Jesus calls the church people out on this specifically here in verse 4 where He tells them that they give all of these religious demands to people but don't do anything to help them in their lives. That one hurts too because there isn't a person in this room, myself included, that Jesus couldn't have said that to at some point in our lives. How many times have we heard about somebody's problem and given them a Bible verse or principle that they should be following instead of really helping them? When somebody comes to the church telling us about how they have been abused and we tell them that God hates divorce, or that God wouldn't want the churches testimony being hurt because an adult abused a child and if people found out it would hurt the church, we are telling people that Christianity doesn't work. Like Jesus is calling them out for here, we give them a religious command instead of actual help.

What about us as individuals? What do we do that makes people think that maybe Christianity doesn't really work? We might not be covering up abuse, but how about how we treat people when we are outside of these doors? Does the waitress at the restaurant you eat at after church today see you the same way as the person who is sitting beside you now? Have you ever left a fake \$5 bill with a bible verse on it instead of an actual tip; the verse is great, but a fake \$5 bill won't pay for her daughters shoes? Do you talk down to people who work in service jobs while you're out an about in town? How do you talk to your friends, spouse and kids about minority groups or down and out groups or people from other political parties or other parts of town when you aren't in this building on Sunday mornings? Do your kids friends see the same side of you at a sleepover as they do during Sunday School? Do you have

to clean up and hide certain things in cabinets when church people are coming over to your house? Do your kids and your spouse see you the same outside of this building as they do inside of it?

We all have areas where we are hypocritical that we need to work on. This is where we have to understand that many of our behaviors are the reason that people see the church as hypocritical. We can try to give excuses and keep on being hypocrites or we can understand the reasons and try to change our behaviors. The only way to reverse the trends is to reverse the image of the church, so the only real answer here is to stop being hypocritical. Will we ever be perfect? Well no, and I am not suggesting that we will, but we can sure try and when we mess up we can own it and not excuse it. We can take responsibility instead of giving an excuse! (It's not what you did, it's what you do with what you've done.)

So how do we work at not being hypocritical. I'm going to give two, just two, really simple and easy ways to make sure that you and I aren't adding to the view of Christians as hypocrites. The first is simply to be real and authentic. We have built up walls between ourselves and others and those walls keep people from Jesus. Those walls consist of things that we say but don't do in our lives. We erect barriers around ourselves because we want to pretend that we don't mess up and that we have it all together. People will understand your struggle, but they won't understand why you struggle and say that you don't. Too often we hide our struggles because of a reputation we want to uphold instead of being real about them so people can see God working in our lives.

Tear down the walls and be real and genuine.

Nobody is expecting us or needing us to be perfect in order to consider Christianity – they are just looking for us to be real! We build a social media and church version of who we want to be and don't let people see who we really are. Those 30% of people who belong to no religious group and don't want to belong to one also don't want somebody pretending to be perfect telling them to be more like them. No, they want to hear about your struggles and how God is working in your life to help you overcome those struggles. They don't want you to tell them that you have it all figured out and if they were just more like you...no, they want to hear how you're more like them because you struggle too and how your faith is helping you. It is in sharing our struggles that we can share how Jesus has helped us to overcome those struggles and become more like Him. The Gospel message is a message of overcoming our mistakes through faith in Jesus, it is a story of new life and we can't share that story by pretending that we never really need a Savior because we never mess up. We ruin the Gospel story when we make it about what we do or don't do instead of it being about what Jesus has done.

The second thing that we can do is also pretty simple – love people where they are, because you were once there too.

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None of us was born a believer. Christianity isn't something that you are born into or get from your parents or your country. It isn't something that comes with certain birth certificates. It is something that we all have to choose for ourselves at some point in our lives; it is a decision that we make when God brings us to the point where we finally see the light. Sometimes when we've been in the light for a while we forget that we were once in the dark and what that felt like. We forget where we came from.

As Christians we can fall into this trap of being judgmental of people who are not yet where we are in faith. We want so badly for people to see how their life can be changed by Jesus that we forget that there is a process for most people that God is walking them through. We don't really know where they are in that process, or if they're in the process at all, and sometimes we want to just jump right to the end without taking the steps needed along the way.

It is important for us to do what we are commanded by Jesus to do – love people. That's it! It is simple! It is not our job to convict them of their sins – that is the Holy Spirit's job. It is not our job to save them – that is Jesus' job. It is not our job to decide their eternal destiny – that is God's job. Our job is very, very simple and Jesus says it to us over and over again – love God, love people. One of the things that we can do to be less hypocritical is to stay in our lane – let God be God, He's pretty good at it, so He doesn't need us trying to do His job for Him.

Let's go back to an example I gave earlier – the pregnant teenager. If the church was really concerned, and I mean really concerned, about being like Jesus as opposed to keeping up some image I think that we would handle this issue differently. We all know what happens if an unmarried young woman gets pregnant in most churches – we never see them again! The church doesn't want her there because the other girls might get ideas. The church doesn't want to help because that might seem like they are condoning the pregnancy. The young woman is shut out and kicked to the curb. It doesn't sound nice but we'd be lying to ourselves if we didn't say that this is what happens most of the time.

The church and its people will give her all sorts of verses and statements on what she can and cannot do with that baby, of course, but we won't tell her that one of the options is to come so that we can help her. The church doesn't often rally around this young lady, find her support, hold her hand and walk with her through her pregnancy and motherhood. We say that all are welcome and that we love you no matter what and that your church family will always be here for you – but we don't really mean it, do we? If so, like we said earlier, the church would be a place that pregnant teenagers run to for help, not the place they run from.

There are conditions that we put on love that make us look like hypocrites. We do this to ourselves, which is actually good news, because that means that we can undo this to ourselves too! We can love extravagantly. We can love recklessly. We can love our community and the people God put in our lives so hard that people might say that we are crazy, and maybe even love too much! I'd rather us be known as people who love too much than people who don't love at all.

We can be reckless and extravagant with our love.

It's a heavy message this morning, I know. Nobody likes to look introspectively and see that maybe we have made a mess of things that we thought we were actually trying to clean up. The good news is that you're not alone – we have all been there and most of us are still there right now. The even better news is that this doesn't have to be a fatal mistake. We can leave this room today and begin fixing it the second that we walk outside of this door.

None of us want to act like the people Jesus was correcting in this passage. We don't want to be hypocritical. We don't want to scare people away from Jesus. We want to do the right thing and to let the light inside of us shine so bright that people can't help but ask us about the source. That is who we really are, that is who you really are. Inside of all of us is a love that burns so bright that it is waiting to burst out from us into a dark world and change everything. As we go out into the world today, let's all look for ways that we can love recklessly and extravagantly. If we're going to err, let's err on the side of love. Let us look at our own lives and tear down our walls, be real with people and love them so much that they will see the light of Jesus bursting out from us. This week keep your eyes open for opportunities that God gives you to show people who He really is!