

MATTHEW 6:2-18

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY HYPOCRITES IN THE CHURCH?

“When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”¹

People defend their decision to avoid attending church because of the actions of others. “There are too many hypocrites,” they confidently assert, as though that could justify ignoring God. Confident assertions that there are too many hypocrites in the church, usually elicit from me the response, “Come on and join us; we have room for one more.” Even followers of the Risen Lord are known to complain that His churches are filled with hypocrites. Why does the perception of hypocrisy among the churches persist? What can a congregation do to address the problem of hypocrisy within their own congregation? Does God’s Word provide guidance in addressing this admittedly serious problem? Let’s look to the Word for the answer.

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HYPOCRISY AND THE FAITH — No less than seventeen times is Jesus recorded as accusing the religious leaders of that ancient day of hypocrisy.² One particularly pointed use of the opprobrium is recorded in **MATTHEW 23:13-31**. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”

Analyze the Master’s accusations against these men in order to understand what would bring such harsh condemnation. Religious leaders complicated knowing God through distorting His nature [**VERSE 13**]. They sought proselytes rather than disciples of the True and Living God [**VERSE 15**]. They valued the externals rather than the transformative power of the Almighty [**VERSES 16-22**]. They were icily precise in fulfilling duty without evidencing a changed heart [**VERSES 23, 24**]. They were unconcerned about reflecting the character of the God they served [**VERSES 25, 26**]. They mischaracterised righteousness [**VERSES 27, 28**]. They lived in light of past glories rather than living in the present [**VERSES 29-31**].

Tragically, the lifestyle that the religious leaders had adopted in long ago Judea was neither unique to that era nor to that culture. Choosing religion over a transformed life is a continuing threat in every era and within every culture. Canada is not excepted; and Canadian churches fight the same battles today. Churches are convinced that success if measured by the number in attendance, the amount of the offerings or the popularity of programming. However, godliness is not highly esteemed; and the world watches our rapid descent into irrelevance.

² MATTHEW 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51; MARK 7:6; LUKE 6:42; 12:56; 13:15

Undoubtedly, hypocrisy does exist among the churches. The reason I can be certain this is so is because Jesus warned that such conditions would continue throughout this present age. Perhaps you will recall a parable Jesus told. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’”

[MATTHEW 13:24-30].

However, I caution that much of what is seen as hypocrisy may have another explanation. Some believers are simply untaught. We preachers do not always do a good job of presenting the whole truth of God, and the flock often suffers. Rather than fulfilling our role as under shepherds, we hire out to be paid preachers doing the bidding of rebellious people. That such a situation would be characteristic of the final days of this Church Age is apparent from Paul’s warning to a younger preacher. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-4].

An appropriate response to improper action or errant doctrine resulting from incomplete teaching is demonstrated by an incident that occurred in ancient Ephesus. “A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” [ACTS 18:24-26].

Remember, one act or one choice does not make an individual a hypocrite. Though one may act inconsistently on occasion, her life is not defined by that one incident. We tend to judge people by one or even by a couple of incidents; however, to do so is truly unfair. Peter did deny the Master when under duress. However, remember that the one who cowed before a little maid was the same who stood before the Jewish Council and charged, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [ACTS 4:8b-12].

Also, understand that the charge of hypocrisy is frequently tossed about because we seek to wound. In our anger, we want to hurt those with whom we are angry. We want to demonstrate our superiority over those with whom we disagree, so we accuse them of hypocrisy. We make ourselves judge, jury and herald to announce to any who will listen that those with whom we disagree are mere pretenders and not “real Christians” like ourselves.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY HYPOCRITES IN THE CHURCH?

Listen! The church is a hospital for wounded, weary people. At any given time any of us will prove hypocritical. What we need is mercy rather than condemnation. What we need is one who will come alongside to stand with us, to encourage us, to strengthen us, to comfort us. We are gathered as congregations in order that we may together build, encourage and comfort. Christians are called to meet together in order to serve one another. In fact, this constitutes the great test for the conduct of our service. “The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:3].

Jesus did not invite that righteous, but sinners to come to faith. The Master testified, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” [MARK 2:17]. On another occasion, Jesus rebuked the religious leaders, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” [MATTHEW 9:13]. The Master has invited the weak and the weary in gentle words that speak to the heart of those who struggle to do what is right. “Come to me, all who 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” [MATTHEW 11:28-30].

That is ever our invitation as we echo His gracious invitation. Here, within the assembly of saints, we receive the broken, the wounded, the weary. We are not a perfect people, but we are being perfected. We invite all who are willing to join us as we discover mercy and grace, and as we equip ourselves to serve valiantly and effectively in this great cause of declaring life to all who will receive it. Amen.