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THE PROBLEM OF HYPOCRISY

[This lesson was not taught as a part of this series, and is taken almost entirely from Discussion 5 of Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life* DVD discussion (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).]

Christianity, in its past and present, has often been accused of being full of injustice and hypocrisy. The Christian crusades of yesteryear, the scandals in many of today's churches, the seeming lack of care or involvement by many churches in the social injustices of the world at their doorstep, the intolerant polemics against certain lifestyles and worldviews, and the inconsistencies of so-called Christians all around us have caused many outsiders to seriously question or finally abandon all confidence in the Christian worldview.

On that last, more relational level, one objector stated, "I think the objectionable Christians that I've seen [struggle with loving their neighbor] ... I see them being judgmental, I see them being extremely self-righteousness, and I see them holding people that they deem to be sinners to a different standard than they would themselves, and I find that to be extremely problematic."

Clearly, then, people feel that they cannot identify with an institution such as the church or with Christian individuals when they see such an appalling record of injustice or hypocrisy. Let's consider this objection under three headings.

THE REALITY OF THE PROBLEM

1. The church may be guilty of hypocrisy.

Unfortunately, this is sometimes the case. Possible reasons:

- Because of a well-intended misunderstanding or misapplication of the Bible
- Because Christians are sinners and are indeed judgmental and fail to live up to their standards
- Because of pure thoughtlessness (i.e., "Before I was a Christian I used to..." can come across as judgmental)

There certainly are inconsistent people in the church (i.e., those who say one thing but do another; those who know they are doing something wrong, but they put up a front), but there are inconsistent people everywhere. There just aren't that many people whose lives really match their rhetoric; none of us are as kind or patient or forgiving, etc. as we know we should be or want to be.

2. The church may be guilty of injustice.

In his book *God is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens addresses a hypothetical question he was asked on a panel with radio host Dennis Prager: If he were alone in an unfamiliar city at night, and a group of strangers began to approach him, would he feel safer or less safe, knowing that these men had just come from a prayer meeting? Hitchens answers,

*Just to stay within the letter 'B,' I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case ... I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance" (Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007], 18).*

Hitchens then gives detailed descriptions of the tense social and political situations within these cities, which he attributes to religion.

Like Hitchens, many people believe that religions like Christianity inevitably lead to violence and oppression. Unfortunately, that has at times been true. Violence done in the name of Christianity (or

any religion or philosophy) is a terrible reality and must be both addressed and redressed. Furthermore, any religion can take transcendent ideas and combine them with feelings of superiority, and that mixture can turn explosive.

However, the statement that religion leads to violence is too simplistic. For example, the communist regimes of the 20th century (atheistic by design) perpetuated horrific acts of violence and injustice in the name of the state.

So, apparently, there is something deep in human nature that leads us to make some idea or value transcendent or absolute in order to claim superiority and have an excuse to oppress or do violence. Some Christians have failed to resist this impulse, but the universality of violence means we cannot pin the problem on religion. The problem is within us.

THE REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

1. The nature of the church

R. C. Sproul writes, “The Christian church is one of the few organizations in the world that requires a public acknowledgement of sin as a condition for membership. In one sense the church has fewer hypocrites than any institution because by definition the church is a haven for sinners. If the church claimed to be an organization of perfect people then her claim would be hypocritical. But no such claim is made by the church. There is no slander in the charge that the church is full of sinners. Such a statement would only compliment the church for fulfilling her divinely appointed task” (*Reason to Believe* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 78-79).

In this peculiar way, then, Christianity is internally consistent—the church is full of sinners because in order to be a Christian a person has to admit that he or she is a sinner. In other words, it is not really a surprise that Christians sin, that there is an inconsistency between what they say and what they do, because the Bible explains again and again why people’s hearts are drawn toward selfishness and pride and so on. The Bible says “this is how you should live if you believe this” but it also says “you can’t and you won’t” and provides a solution to that problem in Jesus. Christianity, unlike other religions or self-help programs, acknowledges it cannot be followed perfectly.

2. The weakness of Christians leaders

In tandem with the above point, some have used the classic example of the church being like a hospital for spiritually sick people and shown that we should expect, then, that the church contains sick, inconsistent people. Others would object to that, on the basis of there being a difference between the patients and the doctors—that is, church leadership, like the doctors, shouldn’t be infecting the patients, but helping them. This objection points out that it often seems that church leadership is exacerbating the problem of hypocrisy, not alleviating it. While that is unfortunately true in some cases, we can respond (1) even doctors get sick and/or mess up in their practice (e.g., David and Peter in the Bible), yet (2) “doctors” (i.e., church leadership) must indeed be more careful about their spiritual health (cf. James 3:1).

3. The dangers of labeling oneself

Two additional observations help us understand some of the reasons underlying the charge of hypocrisy in the church. First, it is those who visibly/verbally express their moral ethic (i.e., Christians) who are most vulnerable to the scrutiny of others—their failure and hypocrisy is more evident and more obviously discovered and thus more easily criticized and condemned. Second, within Christendom, since there is no formal standard of becoming a Christian, people of all kinds can claim to be “Christian”—it’s inevitable that some are disingenuous and bring reproach upon sincere Christians through their inconsistent behavior.

THE RESOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

1. For the one who is objecting to the hypocrisy and injustice in Christianity — perspective.

a. Consider the motives of the other person

We are all wise to put ourselves in the shoes of the one we are judging, rather than simply interpreting his/her actions through our own lens. When we do so, we may understand in some situations, that what we deemed to be unjust or judgmental was actually genuine and honorable loyalty to a

conviction. We might be mistaking or misunderstanding their position, their demeanor and spirit, their purpose and motive, etc. unless we try to see it from their perspective.

For example, a pastor's intensified energy when warning against homosexuality may not be judgmental animosity; instead, his commitment to God's honor and desire to protect people from sin's destruction may honestly be compelling him to share what he believes to be life-flourishing truth! Similarly, a Christian's commitment to the exclusivity of Jesus Christ may not be driven by a feeling of superiority and judgmentalism (although some Christians undoubtedly come across that way and may even unfortunately think that about themselves); instead, if that Christian truly believes that Jesus is who He said He was, then he has to believe in the sufficiency of Jesus' teaching alone!

b. Consider the teaching of Jesus

The Christian Scriptures affirms (1) that Jesus Christ Himself practiced no hypocrisy or injustice, (2) that God is the avenger of the wronged and oppressed and the judge of the deceiver and fraud, and (3) that Jesus Christ will bring a resolution even to this aspect of life's brokenness—He is making and will make all things new (2 Corinthians 5:7; Revelation 21:5-8).

In the Old Testament and especially in the New Testament with Jesus, there are internal self-critiques on religious hypocrisy, what the New Testament calls "pharisaism." Tim Keller states, "The difference between a Pharisee in the New Testament and a Christ-follower is not that the Pharisee and the Christian aren't both trying to obey God; they actually are ... but [the Pharisee] is doing it not only self-righteously and feeling superior to other people [Luke 18:9-14], but when they do wrong they won't admit it and so there is not this theme of humble repentance."

In the Sermon on the Mount (and in other discourses), Jesus gave a strong rebuke of religious hypocrisy or moralism. Jesus wasn't against moral living and religious practices, but

He was pointing out that people often do those things in order to feel superior to others, and thus feel themselves to deserve deference and respect from all others.

Instead, Jesus taught that "the last will be first" (Matthew 19:30); that you find your life by giving it away (Mark 8:35); that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35); that no one is good enough to earn God's favor (Luke 18:18-30).

And, Jesus Himself lived that out by sacrificing Himself so that His followers could be reconciled to God. At the heart of the Christian faith is a man who died a victim of injustice, but who called for the forgiveness of His oppressors. This is why the paradoxical symbol at the center of Christianity is not a giant throne embossed with gold, but a wooden cross stained with blood—it expresses that at the center of Christianity is a God who surrendered His power so that others could live. This is the gospel, and it is in complete contrast to hypocritical moralism.

2. For the one who is committing hypocrisy and injustice in Christianity — repentance.

Martin Luther who said, "All of life is repentance." While most religions operate on this principle—"If I live as I ought, I will be accepted by God"—Christianity has a completely different operating principle—"If I am accepted by God as a gift through what Christ has done, then I will try to live as I ought."

Christians understand they will always fail to live as they should, and that therefore they need forgiveness and grace. In fact, the prerequisite to becoming a Christian is admitting that you have this problem and that you need God's help. And such confession and repentance becomes a required part of continuing as a Christian (cf. 1 John 1:9).

Only people who rely on religious morality instead of grace for their relationship to God can maintain a sense of superiority (and thus possible oppression and violence). Only those who do not routinely repent can be thoroughgoing hypocrites.

So, Christian, practice repentance! If our hypocrisy is an excuse (even a bad excuse) for rejection of the gospel (cf. Titus 2:5, 8, 10; 1 Peter), then let us deal seriously with our hypocrisy/sinfulness.

- Isaiah 57:15 — God dwells with the contrite and humble.
- James 4:6-10 — Hate your sin and repentantly turn from it.
- Isaiah 58; Malachi — God hates the hypocrisy of His people.
- Revelation 3:14-22 — Thoroughgoing hypocrites are not genuine believers.

For the Christian, our humble admission and contrite confession of sin receives the redeeming grace of God because the One we are trusting in and who advocates for us was Himself perfectly blameless and consistent—He bore the penalty of our hypocrisy so that we might receive the grace of His holy humility.

CONCLUSION

Christian, let us humbly own our hypocrisy and turn from it. Let us graciously help the objector think more objectively about the perceived injustices and inconsistencies in our churches. And let us aggressively “adorn the gospel” with good and consistent and genuine good works (Titus 2:10; Ephesians 2:10; Matthew 5:16).