

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 27 October 2002

No. T0237

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Some Problems Christians Face: Hypocrisy - How can I be consistent?

I am sure you are familiar with the story that the Lord Jesus told about a publican and a Pharisee. It is recorded in the Luke 18:9-13. Just to refresh your memory I will begin this morning's talk by reading it. "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus then went on to say of the publican, that he went down to his house justified rather than the other man.

A Sunday School teacher decided to use this story as the theme for his weekly lesson. Assembling all his teaching aids, he unfolded the story in a very dramatic way, completely capturing the children's attention and imparting some valuable insights into the customs that were current at the time. The pupils were made aware of the poor publican's condition and of the Pharisee's imagined superiority. Unfortunately, at the end of the lesson the teacher said to his class that they were now going to pray and to thank God that they were not like the Pharisee!

This latter action completely ruined the whole point of his lesson on the parable. It is, however, so easy for us to imagine that our actions are beyond reproach and our motives clear of the taint of hypocrisy. This wasn't so in the actions of the Sunday School teacher. This trait of hypocrisy and how to deal with it is the subject of today's talk.

One of the charges most often levelled against religious people is that of hypocrisy. I say religious people because every religion has its ethical standards that, ideally, can never be attained. Quite often when someone who is known to be religious fails in some way then the accusations will flow thick and fast. Usually they are of the type that 'if that is how a Christian acts, then I am glad I don't go to church'. Other religions similarly come in for blame because of the excesses of a few. Why everybody of a particular faith should be blanketed with condemnation because of the failings of a minority is never explained.

I repeat that today's talk centres about that dilemma, or perhaps even nearer to home, because I want to examine the possibility of personal hypocrisy and its many dangers. It would be ridiculous to imagine or suggest that hypocrites are a phenomenon of the modern age. The Lord Jesus had much to say about such matters, as we shall shortly see. If we go further back in time, the Old Testament also deals with the subject when it crops up in the lives of some of the characters that people its pages.

The first mention of a hypocrite is in Job 8:11-14 and, as usual, I quote from the Authorised Version. "Can the rush grow up without mire? Can the flag grow without water? Whilst it is yet in his greenness, and not cut down, it withereth before any other herb. So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hypocrite's hope shall perish: whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be as a spider's web".

These verses suggest two things. Firstly, that something is fundamentally wrong with the hypocrite's faith if the Bible compares it to a spider's web. Such a simile would tell us that in the day of testing such faith would fail causing us to drift into the well of hopelessness. Secondly, that before that day of testing everything looks fresh, real and living.

We shall see these same factors as we look at other scriptures. Hypocrisy, here, is the absence of reality in our dealings with God. We put on the trappings of religion but real, living response is absent. This is not to say that the taint of hypocrisy can't invade the lives of those who truly have faith. Obviously it can and sadly it does. Hopefully, the ministry of the word applied in the power of the Holy Spirit will make us aware of our insincerity or hypocritical actions.

One of the themes in Job 13 is that God, being a God of truth, would be aware of the truth on Job's lips. In contrast to this, the hypocrite cannot come before God. Again this would suggest that there is that which is false in the declarations of the hypocrite. His attitudes are mere gesture and posture, void of truth.

Job 17:8 pits Job against the hypocrite. I think it is obvious that Job's suffering was not because he was uniquely sinful or had done some really evil deed and was being punished for it. When his friends tell him the opposite, he vehemently denies that he is responsible in any way. Anyone blaming Job for his suffering was a hypocrite because

they would be at least as guilty of the same misdemeanours, which they pinpointed as the cause of Job's suffering. The hypocrite was speaking from a prepared position without any real faith or understanding of the ways of the living God.

This is further enlarged in 20:4-7 and, though it is not spoken by Job but by one of his counsellors, what is said contains insights into our subject of hypocrisy.

"Knowest thou not this of old, since man was placed upon the earth, that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment? Though his excellency mount up to the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds; yet he shall perish forever."

From this we can see that it is suggested that the hypocrite has his day in court but that it is also very fleeting.

From all of the scriptures we have quoted from the book of Job, I want to emphasise the point that at the heart of hypocrisy is deadness. It is quite pertinent that the word translated 'hypocrisy' in the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible is rendered as 'godless' in the New International Version. There is no reality in matters relating to God. Faith is not present, only a mawkish repetition of half-truths, fables or proverbs. A position is taken and a pose struck that leaves the protagonist feeling superior in the presence of one who is suffering or, perhaps, genuinely seeking answers. Instead of speaking from the stronghold of a vibrant faith in the living God, the hypocrite recites platitudes and precepts from an empty and cold heart.

It is a strange thing that religion, the heart of which deals with momentous matters, can cause some of its devotees to assume attitudes that have no reality. Yet we all know that it is true. One of the most common accusations made against churchgoers is that of saying but not doing. We preach but we don't practise. This is to have the spirit of hypocrisy and we need to be brutally honest with ourselves. We need the searching, piercing glare of the Word ministered in the power of the Spirit. The first question is, 'Do we have a real living faith in the Person of Christ?' 'Do we believe in Jesus?' Perhaps, what we say and practise does not come from a living relationship with God but rather from an habitual performance of the rites of religion.

When my children were young, I made them a rabbit hutch with a separate portion for guinea pigs. Though I say it myself, it was rather a grand affair that took up a great deal of space in the garden. We bought a couple of rabbits, which we installed in the hutch with royal ceremony, intending to buy the guinea pigs at a later date. Next day my daughter, who was little more than a toddler, came in from the garden to exclaim very excitedly that we now had a guinea pig. On investigating I found that one of the rabbits had found its way into the guinea pig's enclosure! My daughter assumed that because this bundle of fluff was occupying space that was meant for a guinea pig then it was a guinea pig! That can happen to us quite easily. If we attend a place of worship and speak words that are not rooted in reality and faith then we are being hypocrites.

It is also very possible have faith in God yet also to have the spirit of hypocrisy. We can say the right words, or pretend to adopt the right attitudes, but do something entirely different. Our demeanour can suggest that we care for the poor and fatherless but when an appeal is made for money we spend it on a new carpet or fancy gadget.

Perhaps if we looked at some scriptures in the New Testament we could find further help with this concept. According to *Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words* the Greek word translated 'hypocrite' in the Gospels has to do with play-acting. I think it's worth quoting part of what he writes, "[this word] primarily denotes one who answers; then, a stage-actor; it was a custom for Greek and Roman actors to speak in large masks with mechanical devices for augmenting the force of the voice; hence, the word became used metaphorically of a dissembler, a hypocrite".

By the first century then, the word has the connotation of a person who played roles. This is in line with the meaning we saw in the Old Testament where the word 'hypocrite' was used to mean absence of reality.

Obviously the word as originally used was not always employed in a negative sense. No one expects an actor to be the person he is depicting. When the word is used in the scriptures however, it retains a totally negative interpretation. We always expect that a person, who is putting forth a point of view that has ethical implications, would also be a practitioner of the ethics in question. The Lord Jesus certainly thought so, especially in the Gospel of Matthew.

In chapter 6 the Lord teaches His disciples to pray by giving to them the prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer. Before He does so, however, He calls their attention to how not to pray. We can read this in verse 5 where it says, "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward".

A similar injunction is given in verse 16 but this time it concerns fasting. "Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward".

We must be very careful to note that in both of these cases the hypocrite actually carries out the deed in question. In verse 5, prayer is made and in verse 16 fasting takes place. The error of the hypocrite is the ostentation with which it is done. One of the purposes of fasting was to indicate one's deep contrition or repentance. For the hypocrite it was an opportunity to intensify the facial evidence of fasting in order to become the object of attention. They were playing to the gallery and, as the Lord says in both cases, they received their reward, which was the praise of men.

If we look at an earlier verse we can see it further confirmed. This time we shall read verse 2. "Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have the glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward".

From this verse we can see that the aim of the hypocrite in giving alms and gifts was the recognition and plaudits of his companions.

We must emphasise again that the hypocrite described in these passages was not guilty of empty promises or of non-action. It was that he was masking his desire for the adulation of men under a cloak of spirituality. It could be claimed that the beneficiary of his giving, especially if it was the hungry and homeless, would not care about his attitude. They would be more concerned with the end result, which was the alleviation of their suffering. It must also be emphasised that the Lord's standards insist on purity of motives. This serves as a word of warning to us all because it is so easy to delude ourselves that we are serving God when, if we are honest, we are really seeking personal recognition. All our service should be motivated by our love for the Lord Jesus. Our call to discipleship should not be mixed with an opportunity to make much of ourselves.

In Matthew 7:3-5, we read of a slightly different type of hypocrisy. This time I quote from the New International Version. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye".

Here, I would judge that the hypocrite is not deceiving others, or seeking the praises of his compatriots. Rather is he guilty of self-deception. Again, it is easily possible to be so unfeelingly jealous of the Lord's interests and testimony that the result is nothing but unadulterated hypocrisy.

Perhaps the best Biblical example of this is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-12. This is the account of Nathan's parable to David about a rich farmer stealing a poor man's only sheep in order to furnish his dinner table. David was livid when he heard the details, even to the point of threatening death to the rich man for his callous indifference. This is when Nathan speaks the famous accusation that David was the guilty man. Up to that point David was blissfully unaware that in taking Uriah's wife he, too, had acted in a similar manner to the rich man. Hypocrisy can be an insidious feature, not easily recognised or admitted by those of us whom it afflicts. When, however, it is brought home to our conscience, we do well if it produces humiliation of spirit along with a purpose of heart to be more vigilant in ridding ourselves of such a nasty quality.

Our last type of hypocrisy is found in Matthew 22:15-22 Here I feel that though the passage is rather long I must read it, as this is the most serious type of hypocrisy. "Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. And they sent unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he said unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way".

From this long passage we can glean that there was a deliberate attempt to act out a part. The disciples had previously been warned regarding the duplicitous disposition of the Pharisees. We now see them at work, deliberately attempting by subterfuge to trap the Lord Jesus into making a seditious statement. In an effort to veil the origin of the enquiry, a mixed company was sent to sound out the Lord's opinion on a controversial matter.

This is hypocrisy at its very worst. Pretending to be benevolent enquirers whilst plotting for a person's ruin. From this sordid episode comes a most wonderful answer that lays down the foundation for the relationship between the Christian and the state, but as that lay in the future it is not for us to pursue the matter at this moment. Suffice it to say

now that this is the type of hypocrisy that leads to the condemnation that is mentioned in Matthew 24:50-51. "The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth".

I think that such words of judgment bring before us the solemnity of a hypocritical, fraudulent piety that covers evil intentions.

The last mention of our word in Scripture, is in James 3:17. "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy".

I think that it is significant that it is mentioned in this letter for James is concerned with the practice of Christianity, more than doctrinal issues. I think it is obvious that one of the many criticisms that are made against Christians is that we fail to live up to the lofty ideals of Christianity.

The important matter that is emphasised this morning is that that failure could be lessened by our avoiding hypocrisy. We have seen that the Old Testament speaks of a lack of reality being at its core. Have we a living faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God? Only we ourselves can answer that. It is possible to pose as Christians without the inner life of the Spirit of God. I trust that none this morning will ever be guilty of the type of hypocrisy that marked the disciples of the Pharisees when they tried to trap the Lord Jesus; the hypocrisy that postures benevolence but practices evil.

For the majority of us, the great danger is the spirit of hypocrisy caused by an inflated ego, when every device is used to inflate our persona. How sad when even those who follow the Man who said that He was meek and lowly of heart use the profession of His Name to gain the adulation of the crowd! What is more pernicious is that oft times we are not even aware of it. I feel that we must be honest and open in all things. We must attempt, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live as Micah instructed his people in Micah 6:8, "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

May the Lord grant grace to each one of us that we may be enabled to live in such a manner.

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