

The Trouble with Christianity

Hypocrites

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I'll never forget the first time it occurred to me that there might be hypocrites in the church. I was 16 years old. I hadn't been part of a church growing up, but I had recently heard the gospel and accepted Christ as my savior and been baptized at a little Baptist church in Bowie, MD. As I've mentioned on several occasions, it was a huge turning point in my life and totally shaped who I became as a person. I remember being filled with so much joy and peace in the weeks and months that followed.

But shortly after that, there was a problem in that church between the pastor and the deacons. I'm not sure exactly what the problem was but, the long and short of it was that, while he was away on vacation, they called a special business meeting and the church voted to fire him. And when he and his family returned home, there was a letter on his doorstep informing him that his services would no longer be required. Then he sent out a letter to everyone who hadn't been present at the business meeting (including me) telling them what the deacons had done. And then it kind of went downhill from there.

I can remember being shocked that people who were supposed to love Jesus and each other would actually behave this way. It made me wonder if maybe this "Jesus thing" that I had gotten in to wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

And I wonder if any of you ever had an experience like that? Something that happened to you or someone else which left you wondering "is this Christianity thing real? Or, is it just a bunch of lofty ideals that no one really intends to live by?"

If you have had an experience like that or if you've thought those kinds of things, then you're like a lot of people these days.

A recent survey discovered that 67% of people between the ages of 20-29 and 75% of people between the ages of 30-39 think, "The church is full of hypocrites, people who criticize others for doing the same thing they do themselves."¹

That's a huge percentage, which helps us understand why this weekend less than 20% of the population nationally will attend services at a church of any kind. In fact, *another* survey of people who don't attend church found that *the number one reason* given for not attending is that "the church is full of hypocrites."² It's no exaggeration to say that, "in the eyes of the non-Christian world, hypocrisy is the cardinal sin of the Church."³

So, for those of us who *are* Christians and *are* part of that church of which they speak, we need to take that seriously. We need to understand what people who are not part of our family think of us and why. We need to be open to their criticism though it's not easy to hear. And we need to own up to the problem instead of denying it or trying to sugarcoat it.

But I also think we need to have some answers that go beyond mere handwringing and shame over "how terrible we sometimes are," because – as we'll see – it's the issue of hypocrisy that actually points us to what Christianity is all about at its core. In addition, a lot of people who are not Christians and not part of a church would like to *be* Christians and to *be* part of a church, but need some answers about this issue before that can happen.

So, with all that in mind, I want to respond to three "frequently asked questions" about hypocrisy in this message.

1. Why are so many Christians hypocritical?
2. How does the hypocrisy of Christians affect the credibility of the Christian faith?

3. What are the options for dealing with the fact that a lot of Christians are, at some level, hypocrites?

Now, as you might imagine, there's no way that I can do justice to those questions in less than 30 minutes, so I want to point you to two excellent resources if you're interested in going a little deeper. The first one is a book called *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller and the second is a book called *un-Christian* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. You can get either of those at the local bookstores or online, and I think we actually have Keller's book in our resource center and our library.

Why Hypocrites Exist

So, let's get into it and let's start with the question ... why are Christians hypocritical?

I mean, Jesus made it pretty clear that if we're his followers, we're to ...

"Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." Matthew 5:16 (NLT)

Echoing those words, the Apostle Peter wrote that Christians are to ...

Live such good lives among the pagans [people who are not part of the family of God] that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God ... 1 Peter 2:12 (NIV)

As we heard from the band and Ladell pointed out, we're supposed to bring glory to God in how we live. So why don't we do that as much as we should?

The typical answer is that "we're just not serious enough about our faith." We're just not serious enough about following Jesus ... and sometimes that's true. But I think that's an overly-simplistic answer because there are a lot of people who are very serious about their faith who then act in ways that are not consistent with it.

Just the other night I was playing ball and there was a guy there who, quite frankly, irritated the heck out of me. And I responded in a way that was not the way that I wanted to respond. I got mad, so I started playing like a jerk. I smacked the ball around. I said some things I shouldn't have said. And the whole time I was thinking, "I hope this guy doesn't know I'm a pastor, because I'm acting very un-pastor-like at this moment."

I was being a hypocrite and I knew it ... and I hated it. I was mess of emotions. I was mad at this guy for being a jerk and I was mad at me for being a hypocrite and I just wanted to get in my car and leave. Fortunately I didn't. I actually ended up talking with him later and apologizing, but the point is that hypocrisy doesn't happen just because "we're not serious enough."

Instead, I think hypocrisy happens, in part, because ...

1. It's an unavoidable reality of a grace-based faith, which is what Christianity is.

- If you're going to let messed-up people into your family ... then you're going to have people in your family who sometimes act in ways that are messed up.
- If you're not going to make people earn their way in to your family by proving their worthiness to belong to that family (that's what "grace-based" means), you're going to have people in your family who sometimes act in ways that are unworthy.
- If you invite sinners ... guess what, you're going to get sinners.

And that's exactly who Jesus invited and continues to invite in to his family. On more than one occasion he said things like ...

“Those who are well have no need of a physician; only those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”
Mark 2:17 (ESV)

See, to be a Christian is not first to be well, but to be sick, and then to be made well by Jesus.⁴ As the old saying goes, “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.”

And that’s how it’s been from the very beginning. One of Jesus’ closest friends, Judas, was so messed up that he arranged Jesus’ murder. Talk about hypocritical! Jesus number one disciple – Peter – the guy who eventually wrote that verse about living “such good lives” was also messed up. He vowed he would remain true to Jesus no matter what, and within hours he swore he didn’t know him. That’s hypocrisy at its best – or worst.

If you let sinful people in, they’re going to act like sinners sometimes – even if they’re pastors. That’s just reality. That’s part of the reason why there are so many hypocritical Christians.

I think another big reason why hypocrites exist in the church is that ...

2. Many Christians mistakenly believe that “it’s about being good, so I have to look good even if I’m not.”

The word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek word “hypo-cri-tes” which was a term used to describe actors in the theater. It didn’t imply anything evil, it just meant someone who was pretending to be something they’re not; someone who was playing a role. In fact, in Greek theater, actors would often carry a larger than life mask across the stage with them to portray whatever character they were playing. They were trying to look a certain part.

And since a lot of Christians think that Christianity is about being good, they put on a mask in hopes of somehow looking better than they really are – or, at least what they think others will perceive as being better. That’s where hypocrisy starts.

There’s a great example of this in the scripture, again, featuring the Apostle Peter.

Paul writes that ...

When Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians [Christians not of the Jewish heritage; people who came to Christ as the message was preached], who were not circumcised.

In other words, they didn’t fit into the Jewish Hebrew law of how things ought to be.

But afterward, when some friends of James came [James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem; James was a Jewish guy], Peter [when these Jewish guys came] wouldn’t eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision [for these new believers].

As a result, other Jewish Christians followed Peter’s hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.
Galatians 2:11-13 (NLT)

Peter was a hypocrite, Paul was saying, because he was trying to maintain an image, trying to act in a way that made people think he was some kind of spiritual giant.

And a lot of Christians today do the same thing. As one author puts it, “We all either try to hide our bad sides or we try to make them look good.”⁵

And we do this because of a fundamental misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about. In that same survey I mentioned earlier, researchers found that that ...

... the top priority of born-again Christians is, “doing the right thing, being good, and not sinning.”

That’s what they discovered as they surveyed a whole bunch of people who claimed to be born-again Christians. This is the main thing: Be good; Do the right thing; Don’t sin.

This do-your-best value, researchers wrote, topped *biblical* values like “relationships, evangelism, service and family faith.”

In another survey ...

... four out of five churchgoers said that “the Christian life is well described as, ‘trying hard to do what God commands.’”⁶

Of course, that’s *not* what Christianity is about at all. It’s not about people trying hard to be good.

The People v. The Faith

I’ll come back to that thought in just a minute, but let’s move to the second question on the list – the credibility question. If Christians are still messed up and too often acting in ways that are unworthy, what does that say about the value of the Christian faith? Do we really need it if its adherents are all hypocrites at some level? When you consider the record of Christians both individually and institutionally as a church, maybe we should just get rid of it altogether.

Or maybe not ... because, while there is some validity to the criticism, the conclusion is flawed.

The great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, who was a very serious but also a very messed-up follower of Christ, concerning his own feeble attempts to live the Christian life ...

... once wrote:

“Attack me. I do this myself. But attack *me* rather than the path I follow and which I point out to anyone who asks me where I think it lies.

“If I know the way home and am walking along it drunkenly, is it any less the right way because I am staggering from side to side!”

That’s a great point and an excellent analogy. The fact that Christians don’t always follow the way or stay on the straight and narrow is, in and of itself, not a valid reason to discount that way. It’s not a reason to abandon ship or to argue “we just need less of that Christian stuff in our world.”

In fact, it’s just the opposite.

1. The solution to hypocrisy is not “less” Christianity – it’s “more.”

The solution to hypocritical Christians isn’t less of Christ; it’s more of Christ.

This is where people get confused, again, over what the Christian faith is all about in the first place. Let me see if I can explain this a little deeper with a little help from Tim Keller. He writes:

Think of people you consider [to be] fanatical [Christians]. They're overbearing, self-righteous, opinionated, insensitive and harsh. Why? It's not because they are too Christian, but because *they are not Christian enough*. They are fanatically zealous and courageous, but they are *not* fanatically humble, sensitive, loving, empathetic, forgiving or understanding – as Christ was.

What strikes us as overly-fanatical is actually a failure to be fully committed to Christ and his gospel. The antidote is not to tone down and moderate the faith, but rather to grasp a fuller and truer faith.⁷

Of course, the question is “what is that fuller and truer faith”?

Well, let's listen to the testimony of a person who was once a fanatic – and a hypocrite – who, through the grace of God, was able to grasp that kind of faith. The Apostle Paul wrote ...

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

In other words, “If anyone thinks they are really good at trying really hard to be really good ... I can top them all.”

*Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;
In regard to the law, a Pharisee;
As for zeal, persecuting the church;
As for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*

In other words, Paul is saying, “I was born good and I was a fanatic about trying to be good.”

But something happened. Paul came to understand that a relationship with God wasn't about trying to be good ...

... which is why he wrote ...

I consider [all of those things that made me look good and made me think I was good] rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law [not trying to prove how worthy I am or how righteous I am by trying hard to obey God], but that, a righteousness, which is through faith in Christ...
Philippians 3:4-9 (NIV)

And that's the fuller and truer faith. It's a faith that's not based on performance; on trying to be good (which leads us to try to look better than we are). The fuller and truer faith which hypocrites need more and not less of is a faith that says just what Paul said: “It's not about my goodness – I have none; it's about Christ, so I do not have anything to prove.”

And once we have nothing to prove to God or to anyone else, *we destroy the foundation of hypocrisy* because we have no reason anymore to pretend that we're something we're not.

Friends I think this is why we have to be very careful when we start talking about “getting serious” about our faith as an antidote to hypocrisy. What most Christians hear when someone says that is, “try harder to be good – get serious about your faith – so we can impress people ‘out there’ that our way really is the right way.”

But that kind of thinking, I think you can see, is part of what causes the problem of hypocrisy in the first place. If you're going to get serious about your faith, get serious about it because your whole life depends on it. Get serious about it because of what's happening to you on the inside or not happening to you on the inside, at the heart level, not because of what people on the outside might think. There's a huge difference between the two.

See, the solution to hypocrisy is not *less* Christianity, it's *more* – more of the real and grace-based thing. If you don't get anything else out of this message, get that, OK?

Another reason why it would be foolish to dispense with Christianity over the hypocrisy of Christians is that ...

2. The greatest resource for criticism and self-correction of that hypocrisy comes from inside of Christianity.

And that may be a little bit of a surprise, because a lot of people think that the greatest criticism of Christianity comes from the outside, from people who are *not* believers pointing out the flaws of both individuals and institutions claiming to follow Christ.

But if you read the Bible with any level of consciousness, you will quickly see that's just not true. As Keller puts it, "The Bible gives us the tools for analysis and unflinching critique from within the faith."

For example, at least nineteen times in the Gospel accounts, Jesus confronted the people he called hypocrites. On one occasion, he actually called a group of people together to point it out. You can read the whole story in Matthew 23, but I'll read just a part of it. In the beginning he says,

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat [they have the position of explaining to you what God has revealed through Moses and the Prophets]. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you to do. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders [they come up with all these rules of things you've got to do and how you've got to live and tell everybody], but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.
Matthew 23:1-4 (NIV)

And then Jesus goes into a list of the ways in which the Pharisees – and many of us – act as hypocrites, culminating in this saying:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." Matthew 23:27-28 (NIV)

Again, there it is: worried about how you appear on the outside, without paying any attention to the inside. That's hypocrisy. And the greatest criticism of it is not coming from the outsiders. It's coming from the inside, from the founder of the faith, Jesus himself.

As to the issue of Christianity being a self-correcting faith, history shows again and again how a better and truer understanding of the faith brought about changes in those who claimed to be part of it.

And, we could go on for hours and hours with this, but as an example, the African slave trade of the 1700s and early 1800s came to an end because of Christians like William Wilberforce who were convicted not just of their own hypocrisy, but that of an entire nation – Great Britain, and great things changed.

Racial reconciliation began to take place in South Africa in the last several decades, largely because of a biblically-based conviction of the need to forgive in Christ-like fashion.

But the most stunning example of this self-correction principle happened right here in this country in the Civil Rights movement, which was not primarily a political experience but a religious and spiritual movement. As historian David Chappell puts it: "there is no way to understand what happened then until you see the Civil Rights movement as a *religious revival*."

Why would he say such a thing? Because when MLK, Jr. – Reverend MLK, Jr. – confronted racism in the white church in the South, he did not call on them to become more secular. Instead, he invoked God's moral law and the Scripture. Read his speeches and sermons and you will see that what he was doing was calling on *white Christians* to be more true to their own beliefs and to realize what the Bible really teaches. He repeatedly invoked the prophet Amos, who said, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24). The greatest champion of justice in our lifetime knew that the antidote to racism was not LESS Christianity, but a deeper and truer version of Christianity.⁸

Let me sum up what I'm trying to say here by quoting another reverend, Tim Keller, who says,

"The answer is *not* to abandon the Christian faith," Keller writes, "because that would leave us with neither the standards nor the resources to make correction. Instead, we should move to a fuller and deeper grasp of what Christianity is."⁹

Dealing With Hypocrites

So we've talked about why there are hypocrites in the church: a grace-based faith pretty much guarantees that you're going to have hypocrisy, and most Christians want to pretend to be better than they really are because we just don't understand that grace-based thing.

But we've seen, I think, that the credibility of the faith isn't necessarily damaged by that reality. We've seen that the answer is not less but more Christianity (in its truest and deepest sense), and, that to abandon the faith would be to abandon the greatest source of criticism and self-correction.

In the end, however, as individuals we all still need to come down somewhere on this issue. We still need to figure out what our response is personally to this reality. How are we going to deal with all of these hypocrites running around in the church that either we are a part of or we are observing or we know someone who is involved, how are we going to deal with that?

Well, I think that depends on *which hypocrites you're talking about*. If you're someone who is on the outside of the faith looking in, as you analyze it, I think you only have two options in the end; two decisions you can make.

Option 1. Judge and condemn ... just like the hypocrites do.

Basically, do what the hypocrites themselves do. Look for people who aren't living like they know they should and be critical of them; write them off as losers ... even though if the truth were known, you yourself are not living according to your own moral code.

"But, Rick, I don't go around like you Christians do, telling people how they are supposed to live or telling them how I'm trying to live."

Just because you don't talk about whatever moral code you live by doesn't mean you don't have one. You have one. And just because you don't pretend to be better than you are by acting "Christian" (whatever that means), you do pretend to be better than you are. Often. We all do it. Welcome to the human race ...

... which means that you, too, are welcome to become part of the imperfect family that Jesus came to create ... which is the second option.

Option 2. Join up ... with a community of people who are under grace and who are being remade – although sometimes much slower than we'd like – into the character of Christ.

As the old saying goes ... "the church is full of hypocrites but there's always room for one more."

Now, those are the two main options, in the end, for people are on the outside looking in. I suppose there is a third – just ignore the issue altogether, but eventually it's going to come back to you.

But what about those of us who are on the "inside" – those of us who are followers of Christ ... and the hypocrite we're looking at is us? How are we going to deal with our own hypocrisy?

Well, I think we do it the same way we deal with any other kind of sin.

Repent and believe the gospel.

Repent and believe the gospel. Change the way you think. Stop thinking about yourself and the way you think of yourself. Change the way you think about what God wants out of people and what the gospel is all about. Believe the gospel. Stop acting like God is off somewhere else and doesn't care about you. Repent and believe the gospel. Believe that it's not about being good; it's about Christ being good and taking our place and giving us strength to become – over time – more and more like Him even as we continue to fail and struggle.

Jesus once told a story that illustrated what it means to repent and believe the gospel with respect to this very issue of trying to be good and look good.

"Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.'

I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 18:10-14 (NLT)

He understood that it wasn't about being good; it was about receiving grace and being forgiven and changed from the inside out.

That's why the Apostle John once reminded followers of Jesus:

If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

*If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.
1 John 1:8-10 (NLT)*

One author writes:

"This is how, in the Lord's way, we avoid hypocrisy: we continue to confess our sins. We acknowledge that we are sinners always in need of the Lord's forgiveness. Rather than speaking like we're holy and acting like we are not, Christians confess their own sinfulness, and then rejoicing in the Lord's forgiveness we begin to act and do good works of love for our neighbors. We live as we are: forgiven sinners, undeserving children of our gracious heavenly Father."¹⁰

Conclusion

We started out this service singing about the glory of God and the fact that those who belong to Him are to live in such a way that we reflect that glory. But, as we've said, that doesn't happen nearly as often as we'd like or as often it should.

Thankfully, though, the glory of God doesn't depend totally on His people. The people may fail, but God does not. And the fact that God even chooses such people as us is what brings him the most glory.

Earlier, I told you about the most recent time in which I was a hypocrite. I've lost count of how many times it's happened but I've just told you about the most recent time. But, let me briefly tell you about the *first* time I realized that I was a hypocrite and this happened back in the first few years of our marriage. I think Jetta and I had been married about 5 years and we had 2 little girls, Marilyn and Katie, under the age of 3. And, if you have children under the age of 3 you know what happens to your marriage, you know what happens to your sanity, you know you kind of go off the deep end. And I just couldn't deal with it. I was irritable, hard to live with. I couldn't stand myself, honestly. And, the funny thing about it is, we had just sold our house so we could move to Kansas City so I could go to seminary. And I was like, "What in the world are you thinking. You have no business speaking to anyone. You're such a loser. You're such a hypocrite."

And God said to me, "Look, here's the truth - you are a sinner. And, what you're going through right now is yet another reminder that what you and everyone else needs most, more than anything, is a savior. That's what I want you to model to people. I want you to model to people how good I am, not how good you are. See, Rick, you are a model of how gracious I am to accept you even when you don't want to accept yourself. That's why I'm sending you to KC to go to seminary. That's why I'm choosing to use someone as jacked up as you are because any progress at all in you will bring great glory to me." And that's true for me, and it's true for you. That's how it works.

I'm going to ask the band to come on back up and close us with a song that I think helps us reflect on the idea of God's graciousness and the glory that God gets through choosing sinners, messed up people, to be part of his family. So, that's what we're going to reflect on.

As they get in place, I want to say a prayer for you.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ed Stetzer, *Lost and Found: The Younger* Unchurched and Churches That Reach Them*

² David Kinnaman & Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*

³ <http://www.extremetheology.com/2007/09/the-church-is-f.html>

⁴ <http://www.extremetheology.com/2007/09/the-church-is-f.html>

⁵ <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-aiia/hypocrisy.html>

⁶ From Probe Ministries review of *unChristian*, see <http://tinyurl.com/y779lnj>

⁷ Keller, pg 57-58

⁸ Keller, pg 64-65

⁹ Keller, pg 61-62

¹⁰ <http://www.extremetheology.com/2007/09/the-church-is-f.html>