



## THE PROPHETIC CHURCH (PART 4)

### *The hypocritical church*

#### **MAIN CHALLENGE**

*There are three ways in which we as believers can violate the core prophetic message of the gospel, and this all-too-common pattern is understood by the phrase "religious hypocrisy". Religious hypocrites are judgmental of the failings of others; they hide their own sin behind a mask of false spirituality; and they live for this world's rewards rather than to please God, who alone looks on the heart. The root cause of religious hypocrisy is an unsundered heart, fuelled by a "pick and choose" attitude to the gospel message that accepts the moral ethic of Jesus but avoids the need for us to be first changed on the inside. Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy in no uncertain terms, for it is a total denial of the prophetic witness of the Church, and those who walk persistently in it are not saved, as saving faith involves surrender, not just belief in certain doctrinal truths and the ability to quote salvation proof-texts. Are you walking in this damnable sin, or are you (by grace) walking in the true humility the gospel both demands and provides?*

We are examining the nature and purpose of the Church from the standpoint of the key Scripture found in Joel 2:28-29 and Ac. 2:16ff, namely that we are called to be a prophetic people. This means we are fundamentally a people endowed with the personal presence of the Spirit of God, called to speak God's word into the darkness and ignorance of a world without God and called to live lives consistent with the message and example of Jesus, so that people will recognise that we are those who have "been with Jesus".

In a previous message, we identified three key dimensions of that calling: our primary identifier, our primary role in society, and our primary behaviour requirement. Although these do not cover all that the Christian life entails, they go a long way to explaining what our priorities need to be.

In this message, we will examine what happens when the Church forgets the third of these priorities, that our primary behaviour requirement is to live lives consistent with the prophetic message we have been entrusted with.

#### ***"Full of hypocrites!"***

We have all heard the all-too common retort of those who are critical of, or who have rejected for some reason, the Christian Church: "they are just full of hypocrites!". Sometimes, of course, this criticism is just an excuse to avoid the challenges that discipleship entails; often, however, there is a lot of truth to the criticism. And, where this is the case, it can be a devastating blow to the witness of that Church.

Hypocrisy means saying one thing and doing another; it means pretending to be something that you are not. Of course, as sinners, we are all subject to the temptation to think we are more spiritual or godly than we really are, and this can come across as hypocrisy. In such cases, our hypocrisy is simply a matter of not being aware of the true state of our souls. Where such hypocrisy exists (I will call it the "blissful ignorance" type



of hypocrisy), then it is a sin and it obviously needs to be corrected, but it is not fatal to the witness of the believer in question; once he or she is enlightened (either by some more mature believer, or reading the Scriptures, for example), repentance is usually swift and the error corrected. This form of hypocrisy, based in immaturity, is not what I intend to talk about further in this message.

However, there are other forms of hypocrisy that are much more damaging to the life and witness of believers, and of the Church collectively. As we discussed earlier in this series of messages, when we behave in a manner inconsistent with our core message, it is that form of hypocrisy which does the most damage. Now, as we explained in the last message, there are three main strands to our core message, and each one of these creates diabolical problems when we violate them in our behaviour:

1. Our core message is about **God's love expressed through forgiveness** – and we violate that when we walk in a spirit of judgmentalism;
2. Our core message is about **our own need to be reconciled to God through surrender of the self-life** – and we violate that when we hide our sin and fail to live lives of transparent humility, thinking ourselves better than others; and
3. Our core message is about **living for the kingdom of God**, not the rewards to be found in this world – and we violate that when we cling too closely to this world and its values and rewards.

Interestingly, the unbelieving world (certainly in the western world) seems to understand intrinsically that this is what Christianity is supposed to be about, and they tend to call out such violations of our core values mercilessly when they see them. Perhaps 1500 years of Christianity, in spite of its imperfections has had some impact?

When professing Christians fail to live up to these three key behaviour requirements, it is a form of hypocrisy that is infinitely more serious and harder to deal with than the “blissful ignorance” hypocrisy of the immature disciple. It is more serious because it is absolutely fatal to the believer’s prophetic witness; and, where it proliferates in a local church, it is invariably fatal to the witness of that body. This form of hypocrisy is something Jesus was scathingly critical of in the religious leaders of his day; and we can most easily describe it as “religious hypocrisy”.

## **Religious hypocrisy**

*“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach ... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are ... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Mt. 23:1-3, 15, 33).*



I have selected only a few verses from this passage, but they are enough to give us a taste of the message that Jesus had for religious hypocrites, found both here and in many other places. Indeed, a close analysis of the gospels reveals that this was the one sin that Jesus took the most pains to condemn explicitly. Tax gatherers and prostitutes, even the hated Samaritans, found mercy at his hands; but the religious hypocrites, those who spoke the word of God to others but did not put it into practice themselves, were treated mercilessly. Have you ever wondered exactly why was this the case?

The word translated as “hypocrite” had a specific meaning in the ancient world; it referred to actors in the Greek theatre who wore masks to show the role they were playing. Each actor played many parts in the drama, and each part had its own mask. You never saw the actors with their own, “natural” face; instead, you only saw the persona they were trying to portray. The true self was hidden; the nature of their “hypocrisy” was to be always playing a part.

Religious hypocrisy is all about playing a religious part. When you meet a religious hypocrite, you do not meet the real person, you meet the person they believe you need or want to see. It is based on a false understanding of piety and holiness, a belief that what matters to God is what we do, rather than who we are on the inside. It is based upon an outwards-in spirituality (“change the outside, and you might somehow change the inside!”) rather than the inwards-out spirituality of Jesus (“*First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and the outside also will be clean*” (Mt. 23:26)).

Such religious hypocrisy leads inevitably (or perhaps is based upon?) pride, the prince of all sins. This is because, with enough will-power, it is all too easy to cleanse yourself of the outward trappings of sin; and, if these are what you think matter, it is a small step to convince yourself that you are actually better than other people. But it is a form of pride that is based entirely on an illusion; none of us are really any better than the rest of us. We are all sinners, in need of a saviour; the only thing that differs is the nature of the sins we manifest, and now good we are at covering them up.

Religious hypocrisy is also related to a spirit of wanting to please people rather than God; this is especially true when we live in a religious culture that rewards or encourages conformity to outward rules of behaviour, and which condemns or ostracises those who do not conform. We hide our inner struggles because we don’t want to be looked down upon by others, not realising that we are actually perpetuating a toxic deceit, since “the others” we are trying vainly to please are just as sinful on the hidden inside as we know ourselves to be. It is a vicious cycle of pseudo-spirituality that is devastating in its impact on those who are part of it, and on those whom they encounter.

### ***Religious hypocrisy and our prophetic witness***

Jesus condemned religious hypocrisy for one very potent reason: because it is the one behaviour trait that alone flatly contradicts the message he came to bring. The religious hypocrite is not just living in a fool’s paradise of fake spirituality, *their behaviour is a complete denial of the message we are meant to bring to the world.*

Consider how religious hypocrisy fits in with the three violations of our key behaviour requirements from the previous section. Firstly, religious hypocrisy is invariably



judgmental – it is a spirit that compares people (rather than embracing them in love and acceptance) and looks down on their failings. Secondly, religious hypocrites are completely non-transparent, living life behind their mask in order to hide the fact that their inner lives are not surrendered to God. And thirdly, religious hypocrites live for this world's favour rather than heavens, being more concerned with what people see and think rather than what God sees and thinks. Religious hypocrisy is in fact the perfect antithesis of everything that is essential to the message of the gospel.

Jesus came to seek and to save "the lost" (Lk. 19:10), and he makes it abundantly clear that we all fit into this category. We are lost because it is our inside reality – the brokenness of sin, both our own and that of others around us – that makes us so. The outward appearance is irrelevant; in fact, having the appearance of having things "all together" is actually damaging to our spirituality, because the only thing we need to possess in order to come to Jesus is the humility to realise and recognise our desperate need. Jesus does not require any of us to put on an outward show, to conform to religious standards or rules – he simply requires us to bring our real, inward selves to him, and allow him to change us. This is the whole gospel message. And it is the prophetic message he has given us to bring to the world around about us.

Just as it is essential for a prophetic people to be faithful to their given message (even if they fall short in every other way), so also it is vital that our behaviour should be consistent with our message, even if we sin in every other way. For, even when we sin, our prophetic witness is kept intact if we are transparent, admit our faults, and ask for forgiveness. Indeed, our prophetic message is enhanced, as it is all about redemption rather than sinless perfection in the here-and-now. Even the unbelieving world around us seems to understand this; my sense is that they would be far more willing to forgive us (for example, in the deplorable situation of the ongoing sex-abuse scandals besetting so many denominations) if we had only approached the matter with such a spirit of humility. As Jesus himself said, his priorities are the opposite of the world's; if we want to save our lives – or save our pride, which is the same thing – we first have to lose it (Mt. 16:25). The way "up" is always the way "down".

### ***The "why" of religious hypocrisy***

One has to ask the question, why is it that so many professing believers seem to suffer from religious hypocrisy? It is not sufficient to say that "we are all sinners"; whilst this is true, it does not explain why the Church suffer from this particular sin, especially given the dire warnings Jesus uttered on the subject.

The sad truth is that religious hypocrisy is the fall-back position of that form of religion that encompasses the high moral standard of Jesus without embracing his supernatural way of dealing with the problem of sin. In other words, religious hypocrisy, when given a Christian veneer, is symptomatic of an approach that picks and chooses which bits of the New Testament to believe. It accepts the behavioural standards of the Bible, but is unwilling to accept that the only way we can achieve them is in the power of the Spirit. Instead, it replaces the supernatural empowering of Pentecost with fleshly human striving. And, since the only thing we can control by human effort is our behaviour, religious hypocrisy rejects the notion that our hearts need to be changed. We cannot do that in our own strength, so the religious hypocrite conveniently ignores it.



Central to this “pick and choose” approach to the New Testament is the overwhelming need of the religious hypocrite to stay in control. Submission to the Holy Spirit requires us to surrender the control of our lives first to the Lord Jesus, and then (on a daily basis) to his Spirit. But when we surrender control, we can no longer take pride in our achievements; we are on a journey to a destination only God knows, and he alone can get the glory. Thus, pride, control and fear of change are all tied in together with the religious hypocrite.

The New Testament requires us to face one very brutal, uncompromising fact: In many cases, the religious hypocrites among us are not actually saved! Don't get me wrong – I am not saying it is an unforgiveable sin, and all of us from time to time slip into this temptation, I am sure. But many of those who perennially dwell in a place of spiritual play-acting will almost certainly be shown on the Last Day not to have ever really bowed the knee to Jesus. They may have all the right words, they may know the Bible from cover to cover and be able to quote all the proof-texts of salvation, but salvation is ultimately about submitting to Jesus as Lord, not just believing certain doctrinal truths. Jesus warned us in no uncertain terms (Mt. 7:15-23) that a consistent lack of fruit means that we do not belong to him, and religious hypocrisy is the strongest evidence of negative fruit that the New Testament acknowledges.

## **Conclusion**

Given the seriousness of this topic, we all need to humble ourselves and ask God to show us if we are like his disciples, or if we are more like the Pharisees; for truly, a lot depends upon it. May God give us true humility to hear what he is saying to us on this topic!

In the next message, we will bring the truths of the last three messages together with a bit of historical perspective, and discuss why the modern western Church finds it so difficult to be the prophetic people we have been called to be.

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