

Challenge Religious People

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[0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be ever acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The warning against hypocrisy. In our series, What Would Jesus Do?, we encounter Jesus' teaching here on hypocrisy. It's perhaps something that every Christian recoils in fear of being called or labelled as a hypocrite, because we all know that from time to time we fail.

A hypocrite is a person who pretends to have virtues or qualities that he or she does not have, or whose actions contradict their stated beliefs or feelings. So why do we recoil?

Why do we find it so harmful? Because many of us may have encountered that hypocrisy in our own Christian journey. Sadly, the history of the Christian church, both historically and recently, are littered with church leaders and members who have sadly fallen short of their calling and given ammunition to those outside of the church to pick up stones and throw at us and to judge our lifestyle and who we are, our words, and also as well to twist interpretation of scripture that has contradicted that which is our truth and that we hold to. Hypocrisy damages the very heart of our Christian and gospel life mission message. Do as I say, not do as I do.

And here in verse 4, Jesus challenges that. He names it. He calls it out. He doesn't ignore it. He hits it head on as Jesus does. They tie up heavy cumbersome loads and put on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not even willing to lift the finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see. They make their flacrises, which was a small leather box that sat on their head with Hebrew texts in vellum worn to remind them of the law. And there were a lot of them. And the tassels on their garments long. They loved the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogue.

[2 : 41] Jesus paints a pretty clear picture of what he was observing and what he was calling out. The Pharisees had 613 rules that the people had to follow to live lives that were pleasing to God.

Yet by focusing on these crushing rules, the Pharisees neglected the importance of the essential message of living out a love, a faith of love, grace, humanity, self-sacrifice, and of justice.

They appointed heavy rules and regulations that they slapped on people and demanded that they obeyed and then held judgment over them. So you can understand why Jesus got so upset and called this out. You know, the temptation in our own context is to tell others the way, yet openly and covertly live a life that is less than godly ourselves. There is no point in us living, living a life, one life in here, and then another when we walk out the door. And Jesus was reminding us of that. However difficult that may be, we need to seek the power of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit to ensure that right Spirit within us to live a life worthy of our calling. Fully accountable, walking ever closer to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, to be fully accountable to him, in him, in all that we do and that we say. And the warning Jesus issues here in our reading this morning, the teachers of the Lord and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. You know, you must be careful to do everything they tell you to do, but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. And we have to have wisdom and discernment in that, in our own walk with God by walking closely to him. In many synagogues of Jesus' time, a stone seat at the front was like the pulpit. It was the place where the authorised successors of Moses would sit and teach the gospel. And Jesus told his listeners that they should indeed heed what these teachers say about the law, but to discern and be wise when the teacher's word, lifestyle, practice and behaviour doesn't match what they preach. Many of us will have known those of our brothers and sisters that have fallen and the excuses that are made. Well, they're always like that.

They've always been like that. That's who they are. But sadly, nobody ever challenged them. Here is Jesus making that challenge. Then as today, we need to be alert when others impose their superiority on others or divert the gospel to please others by failing or seeking to please the current

culture, thereby steering others away from God's purpose, his plan and his teaching. We need to be wise and discerning. In our scripture this morning, Jesus holds to account those who have been tasked with leading God's people.

[6 : 11] They've been tasked with that and clearly they didn't like the challenge. The Pharisees clothed themselves and acted in a way to be the focal point for the community. But it had clearly become more about the institution than the message and the mission. We need to be aware of that even today.

What I love about today's raising is that Jesus doesn't snipe at the sidelines. Jesus never did. He actually confronts those that weren't walking the walk. He went to the heart of the temple courts. He didn't stay outside. He went in and spoke openly about what he observed. He brought truth. He named the issues and many had probably already felt that but were afraid to say it. A bit like the king's new clothes.

We need to call it out. He didn't hold back. He knew that there would be a backlash and we knew where that was going. He knew where that was going. And from this point on, there would be a climatic confrontation that was inevitable when truth speaks to injustice. But he went there. And he went there boldly. We are all called to be witnesses. We are all called to be witnesses in the everyday. The hypocrisy is when we massage the message that neither offends nor gently challenges when necessary.

When we present a lukewarm, diluted interpretation of scripture to please the situation, to please the culture or the person, rather than in love, share the truth. Add that to status and then celebrity, and we often lose any sense of humility, accountability and rooting in our own discipleship.

[8 : 11] Being yourself in Jesus and Jesus in you will keep us grounded. It will keep us close. It will keep us faithful. It will keep us true and guard us from hypocrisy. Slipping into hypocrisy is a dangerous place for us all and especially for leadership. I recall many, many years ago, many years ago now, returning from spring harvest as a fresh, newly ordained curate. And it was on a Sunday morning with the gathered 15 in our congregation at the time of the Curacy Church. Look around you people, we are so blessed to have a church that is so blessed and full. But there was 15 and I think that was a pretty full church actually on that day. Anyway, on this Sunday morning, I was in full flight of preaching.

When there came that moment when I noticed Mandy looking at me very strangely. Men, you may know that feeling when your wife looks at me very well. And I was in full flight of preaching.

When you are in full flight of preaching. I was in full flight of preaching. I was in full flight of preaching. When your wife looks at you with a determined look. Immediately, I did the XYZ thing. Examine your zip.

But all was in place. So it wasn't that. But then came the sign language.

I knew there was something wrong. On the way home, I said, so what was all the sign and the look about it?

[9 : 55] And she said, as only a good friend and a wife can tell you, who are you trying to be today? And I said, well, what do you mean? I was being me. She said, no, you weren't. No, you weren't.

You were doing a very effective impression of a well-known preacher who had just been at Spring Harvest. She said, and I had purchased the video just to make sure. And it was on Betamax, if you remember those.

And she said, you were even doing the actions. And she said, and you even went into a Cockney accent as well, just to accentuate the point.

Praise God for people who we love and who love us, who can save us from ourselves, who can save us from our own hypocrisy. Our message this morning is where I want to encourage you, is be encouraged.

Be yourself in Jesus and let Jesus be himself in you. Be authentic to your calling as a disciple of Christ.

[11 : 12] Don't be a copy of another person or a celebrity. Move more and more and more in the likeness of Christ.

Because that way we can know and we can share and people will hear us. The scribes and the Pharisees were called to be servants to their people, yet they treated the call as if to privilege rather than to vocation.

To honour themselves rather than to servanthood and to honour God. And more importantly, guard your heart. Guard your character.

Jesus highlighted, and that word again, light, that will shine light into the dark places of our human condition. As a very raw police recruit, I remember a question I was asked.

Do you like to be liked? It's an interesting question to ask ourselves. Because don't be allusioned, my friends. Being a disciple of Christ isn't a popularity contest.

[12 : 20] And it never will be. It wasn't for Jesus, and it won't be for us. We will be called to stand firm for him. To bring others to know him.

To speak the truth into situations that we may be unpopular. We are called to be humble as we share that message. In situations where we know the message of hope, love, justice and light probably won't be easily accepted.

Yet we still model it. Because Jesus calls us to do that. To remain accountable to him in all things. And to him and him alone in our care and love for one another's.

We are called to resist the clamour of success that hijacks and inflates our earthly ego. And drowns out that still, small voice that always calls us home to the reality of who we are in him and him in us. And to be aware always of that temptation of a self-imposed burden of a needy ego that will sooner or later become the arrogance and self-satisfaction of the scribes and the Pharisees.

[13 : 43] And diminish the light of Christ that shines in us and through us. So how do we counter and guard against hypocrisy?

Simple. Hold fast to Jesus. Hold firm to his ways. Hold firm to his teaching and his character. Seek always the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Immerse ourselves in the Bible. Seeking his way to serve rather than to be served. So that when the person or persons or more significantly, as I found in probably you do, the evil one comes and whispers that lie of hypocrisy into your life.

We can stand firm with clean hands and a pure heart, knowing the truth that he has placed in us. So be encouraged.

Be empowered. Be excited for this message that we have this morning that is given to us so that we can stand.

[14 : 52] And we can bring that hope to a waiting world. And I was reminded of that prayer that we often walk out the door to. Let's share that.

I'll just share those words with you as we move into our next hymn. Go forth into the world in peace. Be of good courage.

Hold fast to that which is good and render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted.

And show love to everyone. Love and serve the Lord. Rejoicing always in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.