

TheForum – Straight answers to straight questions

Why is there so much hypocrisy in the church?

Handout

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 February 2010

Preacher: Mark Jackson

[0 : 00] Welcome to the forum, especially if this is your first time. The way the forum works is that we spend one hour discussing some of the big questions of life and the Christian response to them.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mark Jackson. I'm the Assistant Minister of Grace Church Dulwich, an Anglican church which meets here every Sunday morning. If you take up your handout on the front of the sheet, you'll see that we split our time into three parts, each part consisting of some speaking from me, followed by discussion round our tables.

As I say, this is called the forum, so we really encourage discussion round your tables. If you have a question, please ask it. If you disagree with anything, do say. We encourage a healthy discussion. That all said, let's start with part one. So if you just open up your handouts to the inside. Part one. Jesus can't stand hypocrisy in the church.

So I think we'd all agree that hypocrisy is a sickening thing. The covering up, the pretense, the living of a lie.

[1 : 27] The word hypocrisy originally means the wearing of a mask. It was used for actors, people who put on a show.

And we use it today for people who say one thing in public, but behind closed doors or underneath, something very different is going on.

So you see hypocrisy in the public arena with the MP's expenses scandal. You see hypocrisy in the sporting arena, Tiger Woods, John Terry. We see hypocrisy in our own families, perhaps from our parents.

Listen to what Julian Lennon said about John Lennon, his father. He said this, he goes, he was a hypocrite. Dad could talk about peace and love out loud to the world, but he could never show it to those people who supposedly meant most to him, his wife and his son.

We see hypocrisy in the world, but perhaps most sickening of all is we see hypocrisy in the church. Three newspaper headlines from the past year or so.

[2 : 42] Bishop who preached family values finally admits, I am an adulterer. Vicar runs off with church funds. Priest sent to jail for child sex offences.

Appalling acts of hypocrisy committed by leaders within the church. And for some of us here today, it may have turned us off Christianity for good.

So, you know, what's Jesus going to say about it? Does it bother him? Does he care? Does he just turn a blind eye to it? What is going on with hypocrisy in the church?

Well, I want us to take a look. Turn with me, please, to page 998 of the Bibles on your tables. I'm going to take a break from John's Gospels.

For those who have been coming to the forums throughout, you'll know we've been looking at John's Gospel. But today, I want us to look at Matthew's Gospel. Like John, Matthew was an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

[3 : 54] And like John, Matthew wrote this account, this eyewitness account, to convince people that Jesus is God's King and God's Saviour. But it is in Matthew's Gospel that we see just how strong Jesus' thoughts and feelings are against hypocrisy.

So, page 998, it's chapter 23. I know it's a big chapter. And I'm just going to draw out some of the headlines for you. So, glance with me to verse 13.

Jesus speaking. Verse 14. Again, verse 23.

Jesus has no problem exposing hypocrisy. What's going wrong here? Look at verse 25. I'll read these few verses out. Verse 25. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgent. [5 : 08] You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, then the outside also. Maybe clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

For you are like whitewashed tombs. For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Let me finish with verse 33, the consequence of all this hypocrisy. Verse 33.

Jesus still speaking. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Well, I wonder what you make of those words.

You may be surprised to hear Jesus speaking in such strong terms. You can't miss it, can you? Seven times, Jesus says, woe to you.

[6 : 19] And that word woe is a warning sign of imminent judgment. God's judgment on hypocrisy. And do you know who these people are that Jesus is speaking to here?

Do you know who these scribes and Pharisees are? They are the religious leaders of the time. You know, don't think hypocrisy is a new thing today.

Even in Jesus' time, even amongst the religious leaders of the time, hypocrisy was there and Jesus' condemnation of it is clear. How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

Jesus cannot stand hypocrisy in the church. So the first thing to say in response to this question, why is there so much hypocrisy in the church?

Well, it's to say, you're right. There is. But in no way is it being condoned.

[7 : 29] We've seen from Matthew 23, Jesus cannot stand it. And God will judge it. As the apologetic Ravi Zacharias once put it, he says, the Bible's condemnation of hypocrites is clear.

The Bible also clearly pledges that God will judge hypocrites. God is more angered by hypocrisy than we can ever be.

Hypocrisy is an appalling thing. There's right to be sickened by it. There's right to want it exposed. And the marvellous thing is that God will one day expose it all.

So let me say, if you are someone here who has been hurt or betrayed or let down in any way by hypocrisy in the church, Jesus wants us to know that judgment is coming and God will deal with it. But also Jesus wants us to know wherever we're coming from this afternoon, judgment is coming on all hypocrisy, including the hypocrisy in each of our hearts.

[8 : 53] Because Jesus cannot stand hypocrisy. Well, let's pause there for discussions around our tables and I'll call us back in ten minutes or so.

Well, let me break into your discussions at that point. Great.

And we'll move on to part two of the handouts on the right-hand side, right-hand side, authenticity versus integrity. So we've just seen that Jesus can't stand hypocrisy.

It is wrong. But does hypocrisy mean, therefore, that Christianity is wrong? Hypocrisy is wrong. Therefore, Christianity is wrong.

That's what I'd like us to consider now in the second part. So it could be that some of you may have heard things or thought things or said things yourself like, Christians are such hypocrites, there's no way I could believe in it.

[10 : 00] Or how can you take Christianity seriously when it's so full of hypocrisy? Now, for some of us, if we're honest, this might just be an excuse to hide behind so we don't take the claims of Jesus seriously.

But for others, this is a serious point. And on the surface, this seems like a very reasonable objection. So what's the Christian response to this?

We need to distinguish between integrity and authenticity. Authenticity concerns whether something is true or not. So in our example here, are the claims of Jesus Christ true?

Integrity, on the other hand, concerns the living out of that truth. In this case, do Christians practice what they preach? So two very different things.

Authenticity is something true. Integrity, the Christians, the people, live out that truth. Now, it's important to be clear on the distinction between the two.

[11:05] Because hypocrisy, hypocrisy definitely undermines integrity. But hypocrisy doesn't necessarily undermine authenticity.

Let me say that again. Hypocrisy undermines integrity. Hypocrisy doesn't necessarily undermine authenticity. Let me give you an example. Take parenting.

Parents tell their children not to fight, not to lie, not to steal. Probably loads of other things they tell them, but we'll take those three. They tell them that. And that's a good thing to tell children to do, or not to do.

It's right, we'd all agree that's right. But what if, having just told their kids that in the morning, mum and dad start having a fight in the evening, in front of their kids?

Or they say a lie to one another, or a lie to the kids? Or even steal something. What are the kids going to think then? Well, the kids are going to think, you know, mum and dad aren't practicing what they're preaching.

[12:10] They're acting like hypocrites. Depending on how old the kids are, they might say, you know what, they're lacking integrity. But it doesn't necessarily mean that what the parents are saying is wrong.

Stealing, fighting, lying, these are wrong things. Regardless of whether mum and dad don't always get it right themselves. I think we can all see that, we've all experienced that.

Hypocrisy, it undermines integrity. But it doesn't automatically mean that the message is wrong. And it's just the same with hypocrisy in the church and the message of Christianity.

So turn back with me to chapter 23, on page 998, the chapter we looked at before. Because it's really telling how Jesus actually starts this section.

We've already read out Jesus' strong condemnation against hypocrisy and against the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. So perhaps you'd expect Jesus to say something like, you know, just don't listen to the Pharisees.

[13:16] Ignore them. Don't listen to a word they say. Pay no attention to these hypocrites. But actually he doesn't. Look at what Jesus says in verses 1 to 3. Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat.

So, practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do. For they preach, but they do not practice.

Isn't that striking? See what Jesus is saying? About these scribes and Pharisees, with all their hypocrisy. Jesus is saying, look, do what they tell you, because their message is authentic, but don't do what they do because they lack integrity.

They're hypocrites. And again, we're seeing from Jesus himself, if Christians act hypocritically, there is no doubt that it affects integrity and it is a shameful thing.

But it doesn't automatically necessarily mean the message of Christianity is wrong. You may have heard of vicars preaching faithfulness in marriage only to commit adultery or run off with someone else.

[14:40] You may have heard of Christians teaching about forgiveness and love only to turn out to be quite selfish and judgmental themselves. You may have been part of a church which spoke of community, friendship, only to experience gossip, mictake.

And Jesus says, you know, despite his strong condemnation of hypocrisy, do what they tell you, don't do what they do.

So the second thing to say in response to this question, you know, why is there so much hypocrisy in the church? Why should I believe? It's got to be wrong. Well, again, you know, you're right, there is this hypocrisy, but hypocrisy doesn't necessarily mean Christianity is wrong.

Yes, it means many Christians lack integrity. It doesn't necessarily mean the message of Jesus is inauthentic. and in the next part, we'll see why Jesus says it is.

Well, let's pause there again for discussion around tables. Well, let me break into discussion times again and we'll move on to part three of the handouts, this question, misunderstanding Christianity.

[16:16] So far, we've seen Jesus can't stand hypocrisy. It will be judged. We've also seen how even though hypocrisy is wrong, it doesn't necessarily mean Christianity is wrong.

But it begs the question, well, how can it be right? Surely, if Christianity is true, then Christians should be doing a lot better than they are. And the question still stands, why is there so much hypocrisy?

Well, to get to the bottom of this, we need to be clear on what the message of Christianity is. Many people think that Christianity is about being good.

Good enough for God. Many people think that in order to become a Christian, you need to clean up your life. Be good and then God will accept you.

And if you think like that, well, you'll be thinking Christians are expected to be morally superior to everyone else. God will be good but nothing could be further from the truth.

[17 : 32] So just turn back a few pages, if your Bible is still open, to 981 and now chapter 9 of Matthew. It is another incident between Jesus and the Pharisees, this time over the message of Christianity and what Jesus is about, what Christianity is about.

Page 981 chapter 9, I'm going to read verses 10 to 13. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collector and sinners? But when Jesus heard it, he said, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice, for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

So what is Christianity about? What is Jesus about? You can't miss it there at the end. Jesus again speaking. He's come for sinners. Jesus has come for those who have turned their backs on God.

[19 : 01] Jesus is about rescuing those who need forgiveness from God. Christianity, it's not for good people, it's for bad people, it's for sinners.

forgiveness. Now let me just say that again in case no one mishears me, this came as a shock when I was first told it at university. Christianity is not for good people.

It is for bad people. It is for those who realise they're not good enough for God. Those who admit they're morally bankrupt before God. Those who realise they need forgiveness, God's forgiveness.

And therefore Christians are in no way morally superior to everyone else. the main difference between Christians and everyone else is simply that Christians are forgiven by God.

It's been said that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a rest home for saints. And that is why, well that's the main reason why you see so much hypocrisy in the church because the church is made up of sinners.

[20 : 27] It's full of sinners. Sinners who still make mistakes, still slip up, still let people down. Sinners who are very much far from perfect.

Now, let me be clear, that is not to condone hypocrisy. That's why we started in point one with Jesus' firm condemnation of hypocrisy.

But it is to say that Christianity is not about being morally superior or goody two-shoes or better than the rest. It's the opposite.

It's about recognising you're bad. That you're not good enough, that you need God's forgiveness and you need God's help. I, for one, would be the first to admit that I do not have it all together as a Christian.

I need God's forgiveness every day. I need God's help every day. The church is not perfect, the church never claims to be perfect, and the church will never be perfect this side of heaven.

[21 : 35] heaven. But, Jesus Christ is perfect. You see, how ultimately can you trust that the message of Christianity is true?

Well, not by the performance of Christians, after all they're sinners, but by the person of Jesus Christ. Christ, despite the hypocrisy you see in the papers, the hypocrisy you may have experienced firsthand, please don't let that stop you from seeing Jesus for himself.

In the pages of Matthew's gospel, John's gospel, because Jesus was no hypocrite. If you read through these gospels, you'll read of Jesus acting with incredible compassion, love, wisdom, gentleness.

He's perfectly patient, authoritative, powerful. Jesus asks people to point out sin in his life, and they say they can't do it. Even in his trial, Pilate says, I find no guilt in him.

Jesus Christ was perfect in every way. The Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, said, I believe there is no one deeper, lovelier, more sympathetic and more perfect than Jesus.

[23 : 02] Not only is there no one else like him, there could never be anyone like him. It is Jesus Christ who is at the heart of Christianity.

God himself in human form, the one who loved us so much, he died for us, tied for our hypocrisy so we could be forgiven by God, the one who rose from the dead.

proof that he will return in judgment. And so Christianity, it stands or falls not on the performance of Christians, but on the person of Jesus Christ.

And can I just say, that is great news. It is great news because in the person of Jesus, we have someone who has lived up to God's standards, the only one to do it, the only one to perfectly practice what he preached.

And so the only one who can rescue us from the penalty of our hypocrisy. It is Jesus Christ to him who we need to look. It is to Jesus Christ that we all need to turn.

[24 : 15] Why then is there so much hypocrisy in the church? well sadly, you're right, there is. But with a real understanding of the message of Christianity and what it's about in one sense, what do you expect from a place full of sinners?

The church is not perfect, it never claims to be perfect, but Jesus Christ is perfect in every way and that is what matters because it's to him who we must look to him who we must turn.

Only Jesus Christ can forgive the hypocrisy in all of our hearts. Let's pause there again one more time for discussions.

Let me break into discussions one final time. So the aim this afternoon has been to discuss the Christian response to the question why is there so much hypocrisy in the church?

And we looked at it in three areas. Jesus can't stand hypocrisy, it's wrong, God will judge it.

Hypocrisy in the church doesn't necessarily mean the message is inauthentic.

[25 : 37] And then hypocrisy exists in the church because it is full of sinners, but Jesus himself is no hypocrite. So it's to him that we must look and to him we must turn.

You might be going to discuss this some more, in which case please do stay around, there's more coffee, more biscuits around tables. I'm very happy to take any questions you may have, please do speak to me. If you've missed any of the previous forums, we've put all the talks up on our website, you can see it on the front there, www.gracechurchdullage.org.uk.

Today, we've looked so far at the issue of suffering, the exclusivity of Jesus, the nature of hell, the reliability of the Bible. So if you're interested, if you want to download those talks, the talk parts, you can get them from that web address.

You'll see on the table some of our postcard flyers and you'll see that our next forum, exactly a month's time, Sunday 7th of March, when we'll be looking at what Jesus has to say about freedom, boring, restrictive, where's the fun in Christianity?

Until then, thanks very much for taking part in discussion, thanks for coming today, and look forward to seeing you next time.