

Autopsy of a Hypocrite

Matthew 21:28-32

Introduction

Hypocrisy: What is the greatest threat to the church? There might be as many opinions as there are people. Is it persecution? Government interference? Competition from culture? Dangerous secular ideas? Atheism?

- The temptation is almost always to look “out there” when the more dangerous enemy is often “in here.” Ever wonder why Jesus spoke so infrequently about the dangers of “Rome” and so frequently about the sins of the “religious”? E.g., a book about the wickedness of the world (Revelation) starts off calling churches to faithfulness and repentance.
- The reality is simply this, more people’s faith has been shipwrecked by hypocrites inside the church than enemies outside.

The “Word of the Day” (think Sesame Street), is **HYPOCRITE**: claiming beliefs or standards to which your own life does not conform; **trying to look the part without being the part.**

- How do you sabotage your evangelism? Call yourself a Christian but don’t live like Christ.
- How do you undermine your kids’ faith? Play church every Sunday but don’t live the gospel at home.
- How do you destroy your discipleship? Try to look the part of a Christian rather than doing the hard work of denying yourself, taking up your cross, and actually following Jesus (out of sin, out of the world’s way of thinking, out of selfishness, etc.).

Last Week’s Sermon: The way we preach (in sequence) is important this week because this parable is a **direct response** to last week’s story. It’s the first of three parables in a row (simple stories Jesus uses to illustrate the values of the Kingdom of God). If you feel a little lost on the application:

- (1) Missed last week’s message (I’ll try to fill you in).
 - Jesus, temple, crowds, religious leaders (scribes and elders), questioning his authority. Unwilling to answer his question (where was John’s authority from), etc.
 - Admit John was from God (but they didn’t believe) or say he wasn’t from God and risk the anger of the crowds.
- (2) Parables are confusing to those who don’t believe in Jesus, because the values of the Kingdom run contrary to the values of the world.
 - To those who believe in Jesus, the Parables reveal the nature and purpose of the KoG.

God wants our full-hearted obedience not our lip service.

- God doesn’t want us to try and **look** holy and righteous, he wants to **make us** holy and righteous. He isn’t concerned with the charade of perfection, he wants real, from the heart, repentance and obedience. Genuine repentance is infinitely better than false righteousness.

²⁸ “What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.¹

Summary: This is a pretty simple “parable.” There is a Father with two sons. One son is the disobedient one, the other is the obedient one (at least on first glance). The first son refuses to obey the father but ***changes his mind** and **does what his father wants**; the other son ***says** he will obey but never does. The question put before them is simply this, which of these two is better?

- It’s not saying these are the only two options. It is possible to say “no” and not do it. And, it is possible to say “yes” and do it (we don’t *have* to learn the hard way, though most people choose to).
- Each son is meant to represent a type of person in real life (especially relating to the people standing in front of Jesus in that very moment).
 - The **first** are the **sinner**s who have believed the message of the Kingdom of God (first herald by John the Baptist) and inaugurated by the coming of Jesus. They are not the most religious or righteous. They have problematic and complicated pasts. They’ve done some things (lots of things) that they’re not proud of.
 - The **second** son represents the **religious leaders** who said they wanted to do God’s will. They talk a big game. They pray loudly for all to hear. They look down on all the “sinners” around them. They go to synagogue and temple frequently. They keep the rules, and make new rules, and rules about rules. But, when confronted with the truth of Jesus, they refused to repent and believe.
- Sounds like another two sons (Lk 15); older and younger (Pharisees and Scribes vs. tax collectors and sinners). One is a prodigal, the other is the good one. But the prodigal recognizes his sin and returns to the Father; the older son is mad that the Father would welcome him back (he thought the Father owed him).

Purpose: The purpose of this parable is to **expose the unbelief** of these religious leaders that oppose Jesus.

- This is a shocking claim, that the people most knowledgeable about Scripture, most dedicated to good behavior, and most vocal about their faith are the not the righteous ones!

¹ ²⁸ Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν τέκνα δύο. καὶ προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ εἶπεν, Τέκνον, ὕπαγε σήμερον ἐργάζου ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι. ²⁹ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐ θέλω, ὕστερον δὲ μεταμεληθεὶς ἀπήλθεν. ³⁰ προσελθὼν δὲ τῷ ἐτέρῳ εἶπεν ὡσαύτως. ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ἐγὼ, κύριε, καὶ οὐκ ἀπήλθην. ³¹ τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς; λέγουσιν, Ὁ πρώτος. λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. ³² ἦλθεν γὰρ Ἰωάννης πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης, καὶ οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε αὐτῷ, οἱ δὲ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι ἐπίστευσαν αὐτῷ· ὑμεῖς δὲ ἰδόντες οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε ὕστερον τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ.

- And the ones who seem so sinful and outside of the religious establishment, because they have repented of their sin and believed the gospel, are righteous!
- What an amazing **turn of events**. What a **reversal**. Again, the **upside-down** values of the Kingdom of God are on full display. The people who position themselves as holy are the ones who are left out of the kingdom, and those who have the most transparently sinful background are welcome in.

Jesus is trying to underscore the **hypocrisy** of these religious leaders (here the “chief priests and elders,” elsewhere in the Gospel the Pharisees).

- Both groups had a particular brand of hypocrisy. The **Pharisees** were amazing at moral living (memorizing the Scriptures, shaming sinners, behaving themselves). The **Sadducees** were the old guard who relied on tradition.

These folks *claim righteousness* but won’t follow the righteous path of Jesus when it is right in front of them. They claim to know God but don’t recognize him when he’s standing in front of them. Despite all their religion, their hearts remain unchanged by the power of God.

- What follows is a sort of “**autopsy of a hypocrite**,” some observations from this passage that I think we all should consider so that we can love God from a pure heart and avoid the dangerous path of hypocrisy.
- These religious leaders are exposed in their hypocrisy and false righteousness. It’s possible that we will feel the same. This is not meant so much for the people out there but for us to examine our hearts.

Am I a hypocrite?

- We are not calling anyone to perfection, just pure and simple devotion to Christ.
- We are aiming for authentic discipleship, not artificial morality.
 - It requires honest assessment of your heart and the willingness to surrender every area of your life to Christ

1. A Hypocrite Misunderstands Obedience

Appearances Can Be Deceiving: These religious leaders had a veneer of holiness but it only went skin deep. “Hypocrite” was used to describe actors in Ancient Greece. The idea was that the actor was just “playing a part” (I’m not saying that actors are professional liars, but...). Hypocrisy is play acting. It seeks the appearance of faith without the transformation necessary to make it real. When this happens we run the risk of claiming Christ without having the marks of Christlikeness.

- “Having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim 3:5). E.g., Galaxy Quest, Bolt, etc.
- These are “decorative” believers. Decorative pillows, plates, etc. “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Tim 2:20-21). How many of us are decorative Christians?

Pretending vs. Cultivating: Tying fruit to the tree vs. cultivating fruit from the heart. I've seen this in churches (e.g., mimic the prayer meeting for success rather than meeting God in prayer).

Many people want the results of God's power, not the experience of submitting to God.

- Attempting to use God to get blessings rather than receiving God himself as the greatest blessing of all. E.g., set foot in the church is like setting foot in a gym without working out; taking the Lord's Supper without allowing the gospel to transform your heart.

Father's Will: Notice the analysis of which was the "good son:" the one that "did the will of the Father." We sometimes get into this false idea that what we do doesn't matter at all, just what we believe. Then we define belief by certain doctrine (e.g., Jesus is God's Son, our Savior, resurrection, etc.). But we've gone to great lengths to explain that right information is important (believing false things will not do) but intellectually agreeing and actually trusting are different things. Believing Jesus is King in your head without it affecting the way you live and love is just as deadly.

- How do I know you believe something? By how you live your life. You can tell me you believe something all day, but until I see you act on it, it's hard to take seriously.
 - Believe in the mission of God but won't share your faith?
 - Say you will obey Jesus but won't even obey and get baptized?
 - Say you love the things of God, but the community of God is at the bottom of your schedule and priority list.
 - Believe that Jesus is enough but act like money is what really satisfies?
 - Believe that following Jesus is worth leaving everything behind but won't even get out of that bad relationship?

For John came to you in the way of righteousness (righteousness is not just a type of belief but a way of living).

- That's why James (the letter) reminds us that "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2). Not because works have any saving value but because genuine faith produces obedience to God.

What does it matter what I believe as long as I "do" the right thing? (1) You won't do it if you don't believe it (or at least not for long). If racial justice is motivated by popular peer pressure then you won't pursue it when the cultural tide has turned or when no one is watching (e.g., Central Park woman). (2) Part of "doing" involves your thinking and loving. There is no need to separate right belief and right practice. **What you believe fuels what you do and what you do reveals what you really believe.**

- What proved their trust in the father? Their obedience. They did the **Father's** will, not their own. **They obeyed his commands.**
 - How can I tell you are growing in the gospel? You grow in your obedience to the will of God (e.g., Matt 28; "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you").

Head to Heart: The sneaky thing about these folks is that they filled their life with **religious activity** and confused it with **doing the will of the Father** (we can do the same). Their behavior was not "the will of the Father" but their own performance. They wanted to earn God's favor

without capitulating to God's will. Their life was busy with religious activity but their hearts were unchanged. "Change that ignores the heart seldom transforms life" (Paul Tripp).

- For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.
 - You can go to church and read your Bible and be in sin (the solution is not to stay away from church or stop reading your Bible, but to do these things with the right motives from your heart with joy to God).

2. A Hypocrite Refuses Repentance

Willing to Change: These religious folks were unwilling to change when they were confronted with the truth And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him. They double down in their "wrongness" and sin. I'm sure you don't know anyone like that



- "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. "You think you're leading the charge into the Kingdom, when you're not." The indispensable path into the kingdom is submission to the King.
 - It's one thing to not know or be ignorant, but when confronted with the truth, and refusing to submit is the definition of rebellion.
 - Enter the KoG is an idiom for salvation.

What prevents these religious folk from following Jesus is their belief in their own righteousness. They need to "change their minds" and "believe in Jesus" but, instead, they dig in their heels and believe in themselves.

- What prevents them is their belief that they can control everything.
 - Repentance is often about giving up control, to submit to the loving but complete rule of Jesus. We are turning from our sins which most clearly looks like **turning from ourselves, to trust Christ.**
- **What prevents you from turning to Christ?** What are you holding onto that you need to let go of to find life in Jesus? Reputation? Relationship? Sin? Dream? Desire? Control?

Who's In Control?: Hypocrisy is the pretense of holiness. It is the outward appearance without the inward character. These religious leaders thought they could fool God or control him with their good behavior, while their hearts were selfish and self-directed.

- They are salesmen of holiness, not genuine persons of godliness. They are trying to purchase God's favor rather than submit to his rule. They are trying to charm God (which is why they get angry that God lets in all of these sinners).
 - It's actually the tactic of abusers. They want your trust without being trustworthy.
- Virtue signaling without virtue is simply hypocrisy.
 - "Pray in Jesus' name" to get what you want or because you actually love the things God loves and hate the things God hates.

3. A Hypocrite Misjudges Their Righteousness

Outward vs. Inward: Outward behavior has masked the truth of their sinfulness (e.g., dead bones; whitewashed tombs; cologne on a corpse).

- They've confused their profession of faith with actual faith. They've confused their expressions of religion, with a life of love for God.
- All of us are unrighteous. None of us are "good enough." We're all sinners who fall short. We only come to God by his grace, every one of us ("the ground is level at the foot of the cross").

Unlikely Disciples: This contrasts greatly with those who Jesus said "really do the will of the Father." It's not the religious leaders who are paradigms of faithfulness but those who are **particularly sinful** (e.g., tax collectors and prostitutes).

- Not just "sinners" (but here "prostitute," a particularly shameful sin in that culture).
- Do we identify more with the upstanding citizens or the sinners? We are sinners regardless of our particular "sin" of choice (e.g., respectable sins).
- It's not unironic that Matthew, the tax-collector is writing this as someone who has experienced the lavish grace of God.
- What some see as a liability is actually an asset. These tax collectors and sinners couldn't hide their sin, so they didn't try to. They admitted their lostness. If you're lost, you're qualified to be found (Jesus "seeks and saves the lost").
- The morality of the religious leaders was actually keeping them from faith because they thought they were good enough. "None is righteous, no not one."

And the beauty of the gospel is on display in these sinners, those who had no place in respectable society (much less in the KoG thought the religious leaders) are the ones leading us into the Kingdom. These **unlikely disciples** are at the head of the line, demonstrating repentance, obedience, and transformation.

- Look at the people that God uses and calls? Think you're not worthy? Then you're a perfect candidate because everyone can see that it is God at work in you (not you in your own power).

God's Glory: There's a beauty and depth to being a saved sinner. "I'd rather be a saved sinner than an innocent angel" (Rogers).

- Your sinful past is no barrier to God (in fact it magnifies God's grace and glory); (woodworking; antique character magnifies the skill of the woodworker and highlights the story of the furniture).
 - Your sinful past is no barrier to God **but your hypocritical pretense might be.**

What's the Difference?: What's the difference? It's not their sin (there are no respectable sins), it's the recognition and repentance of the "sinners." They heard the truth and adjusted accordingly. The indispensable requirement to follow Jesus is not your goodness (you are not good) but your repentance.

- The religious folks don't want righteousness, they want the appearance of righteousness.
- They want the blessings, not the obedience.
- They want to be God of their own life.

But they professed faith, they professed a belief in God. A **profession** of faith does not save you. "It's a much easier thing to walk an aisle than carry a cross" (Dever). It's much easier to put money in the offering basket than crucify your sinful desires. It's much easier to say a prayer than deny yourself and follow Christ.

- The heart and the hands of these religious leaders proved that they valued their behavior, opinions, and power most.

Will of the Father: They are not doing the will of the Father. They don't love who he loves. They don't live how he lives. They have not been **transformed** by the gospel.

- In the story, both sons (the first and second) are asked to do the will of the Father, but only the first (despite his initial refusal) changed his mind and obeyed the Father.
- We are not interested in Christians who will tell God "yes" and make professions of faith but are not transformed to follow Jesus, who do not obey. We don't want decorative Christians, we want committed disciples.

Conclusion:

Timing: Are you not where you want to be in your walk with Christ? Is your life filled with sin? Is it filled with hypocrisy? Be encouraged. There is grace for every sinner, tax collector and hypocrite alike. The point of the parable is that the first son, despite a sinful start, recognized and changed his mind to do the will of the Father.

- It's not how you start, but how you finish. At the end of the day, I don't care how fast you get out of the blocks, I care that you cross the finish line.
- I don't care where you've been or how you started, I care that now you hear the call of Christ Jesus and you respond accordingly.
- If you are deep in the most sinful behavior you can imagine, turn from that sin and come to the welcoming arms of the Savior. He has grace for you. You might have said no in the past, but today you can say yes.
- Or maybe you're the hypocrite who's been playing games. Don't drift toward cynicism, lip service, and apathy, repent of your sin and follow the Savior. Let his word penetrate deep into your heart and produce a wellspring of life.