

Grace for the Day

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Dealing with Hypocrisy

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Introduction

What to hurt a Christian? Call him a hypocrite. This stinging name is hurled at Christians, and in recent years, it is beginning to stick. Those from their late teens to their early 30s would use the term "hypocritical" as a preferred description of Christians (David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a new generation thinks about Christianity and why it matters*, Baker, 2007).

If we are guilty of hypocrisy, there should be a solution for it because Jesus Christ our Lord was the most vocal against hypocrisy, and has given us the wherewithal to unhypocritical living. If we are not guilty of hypocrisy, why does the world say we are? Does the world misunderstand us as it did the first Christians? Or are we doing something incorrectly? We will scrutinize the issue in this short but detailed article. We will not be afraid to admit own fault or to assign blame to a biased world. But there will be no dodging of blame or self-bashing.

What does the world mean when they say Christians are hypocritical? What was Jesus doing when he confronted hypocrisy among the religious people of his time? The results may surprise you as it surprised me. The Word of God is living and powerful. It lights our way and dispels the gloom of failure.

Who is a hypocrite?

Let's begin where we are. From time to time, we see people failing to live up to their professions or stated convictions. In today's

world, almost any failure in consistency between walk and talk can be considered hypocrisy, especially when the person is a Christian. Even so, the reality is that it is impossible for anyone of us to be entirely consistent.

If I talk about the dangers of global warming but drive a gas guzzling SUV, does that make me a hypocrite? If I produce a movie about global warming but omit the inconvenient truth about my own über high carbon, high indulgent lifestyle of flying around in a private jet, what would that make me? A hypocrite or a Nobel Prize winner? How much of a disparity do I need to have between my advocacy against carbon use and my personal use of carbon before my advocacy becomes hypocritical?

Webster defines a hypocrite as "1. a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he does not actually possess, esp. a person whose actions belie stated beliefs. 2. a person who feigns desirable or publicly approved attitude esp. one whose private life, opinions, or statements belie his or her public statements."

While this definition truly describes how the term "hypocrite" is used, it begs the question, "When is the inevitable disparity between principle and action hypocrisy and when is it not?"

If parents say they love their children, but at times act selfishly or unlovingly, should they be considered hypocrites? If parents fail to be the shining example of virtues and disciplines they try to instill in their children, are they hypocrites? If a family behaves more perfectly in public than at home, are they all

hypocrites? What is the difference between feigned public behavior compared to trying to behave well in public?

More often than not, when somebody else is inconsistent, he is a hypocrite. When we are inconsistent we are misunderstood.

Why are Christians called hypocrites?

In my experience, Christians are called hypocrites because we are sometimes seen as being inconsistent between our talk and our walk. At the same time, if every inconsistency between principle and action constitutes hypocrisy, everybody becomes a hypocrite.

Let us examine the definition of a hypocrite as *"one whose private life, opinions, or statements belie his or her public statements."* Every Christian believes he is a sinner and though forgiven, he knows he will continue to fall into sin. There is no doubt that he is a sinner in his private life. In public, he leads a class and talks about the need for every Christian to strive for holiness. Even before he opens his mouth to exhort to holiness, he knows there is a huge disparity between his exhortation and his life. Does this disparity make him a hypocrite? I suppose most of us will allow that disparity as long as he is trying to be holy, but qualify by saying that he is also a sinner. But why does this disparity not make him a hypocrite (or maybe it does) when other disparities make him a hypocrite?

Let me paint a different situation for your deliberation. Christians are strong advocates of monogamy and of the virtue of having only one sex partner. If at any point in time the Christian fails at this task, our society is quick to label this Christian a hypocrite. Why do we excuse the one who fails at holiness but not excuse the one who fails in sexual morality? Is our disparity in judgment hypocritical?

What alternatives do we have when we are confronted with being called a hypocrite if our sexual conduct fails to measure up to our public statements? I suggest the following options:

(1) Only Christians with pristine records should speak on the subject. (2) To avoid ever

becoming a hypocrite, any Christian who runs the risk of a sexual sin must not talk about it. (3) If a Christian has "fallen" he can never speak on the subject again.

The virtue of these alternatives is that we will reduce our risk of being called hypocrites. The problem with these alternatives is that we are practically out of advocates. The only teachers we have on the subject would either be very holy or very audacious.

The world has a more efficient way of resolving the disparity between principle and action. Just change the principle to fit the action so there is no disparity. Instead of addressing the sin of homosexual activity, they simply call it a sexual preference. Instead of addressing the sin of adultery, they simply call it the right of consenting adults. The world usurped the right to redefine God's standards of right and wrong, justify the wrongs and conduct their wrongs openly. They are not guilty of hypocrisy because there is no disparity between principle and action.

Christians will always have a disparity between their ideal and their real. Sexual shortcomings are salacious opportunities to level a charge of hypocrisy against Christians because at this point, many in the world do not have the disparity between principle and action that a Christian has.

Seen in this light, we need to ask if disparity is always evil or hypocritical. The disparity between ideal and real, between talk and walk, between goal and failure, are real and necessary. There will be no disparity only when we attain perfection, or more conveniently when we have no ideal.

We are not putting a spin on hypocrisy here. What we are observing is that perhaps not all disparity between principle and action should be called hypocrisy. There is a place for this disparity in a Christian's life even if our society wants to call us hypocrites on account of our disparity. Capitulation to sin is not the Christian alternative to disparity.

We are not justifying hypocrisy. We observe that the Word of God speaks out strongly

against hypocrisy. So who is the hypocrite? What is hypocrisy according to the Bible?

Biblical definition of the hypocrite

(A detailed and technical study on the concept of hypocrisy can be found in the companion article: [“Dealing with Hypocrisy. Research Notes.”](#) This is a comprehensive listing and examination of all known references to hypocrisy in the OT, and NT. The meanings are examined from Classical Greek, Hellenistic Greek and Hebrew, and the use of the term in ancient secular literature.)

There are four aspects of hypocrisy in the NT that are directly related to our discussion.

1. **First aspect.** Jesus frequently used the term “hypocrite” on **those who use external religiosity to conceal or compensate for their true spiritual bankruptcy.** This is exemplified in many instances:

(a) The hypocrite is one who engages in giving, praying and fasting to gain social standing or respectability but he does not do them for their true spiritual value (Matt 6:2, 5, 16).

(b) The hypocrite is one who tries to excuse his filial neglect with the excuse that the money has been dedicated to God (Matt 15:5-7).

(c) The hypocrite makes showy prayers as a pretense to holiness when he lacks compassion in dealing with destitute widows (Matt 23:14 [variant]).

(d) The hypocrite is punctilious in tithing but neglects justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matt 23:23).

(e) The hypocrite emphasizes external cleanliness but harbors internal sinfulness (Matt 23:25, 27, 28; Mk 7:6).

(f) The people, as a whole, are hypocritical in honoring dead prophets when they are the ones who murdered God’s messengers (and continue to do so) (Matt 23:29).

(g) The hypocrite is one who uses religious rules to justify ignoring the needs of a person

while acknowledging the needs of an animal (Lk 13:15).

The main idea running through these examples do not identify the hypocrite as one who has a disparity between principle and action. It points out hypocrisy as the use of external religiosity to conceal spiritual bankruptcy. The two issues: the outward show of religiosity and the inward spiritual bankruptcy are two different issues.

The disparity Jesus points out as hypocrisy is at once broader and narrower. Jesus has a narrower reference point here. He is addressing the issue of externalism in religious profession. The subject matter here is external religiosity and internal spirituality. Hence we may say the reference point is narrower than the issue we have at hand.

However, the connection Jesus makes between the internal and the external is broader. We note that hypocrisy here is not the disparity between public prayer and private neglect or public fasting and private feasting. Such disparity can indeed qualify as hypocritical action but that is not the contrast here. The comparisons bring out a deeper issue. The external religiosity belies their spiritual bankruptcy; that there is no authenticity in their faith.

The external act may not be wrong of itself (giving, praying, fasting, tithing, etc.) but these had become legalistic measures of true spirituality. Jesus is not necessarily questioning the disparity of the act and the principle, but the spiritual authenticity of the subjects. The contrast is not the public-private discrepancy. There can be full public-private consistency and we can still be hypocrites. We can pray in private and in public and be hypocrites. Jesus’ contrast is the disparity between external religiosity and the internal spiritual authenticity, rather than the disparity between principle and action.

Our life is not a response to what the world thinks of us. If we respond to every negative world opinion, our faith will be driven by the world’s expectation. Our starting point is what Jesus expects of us. In terms of hypocrisy versus authenticity, Jesus calls us to an

authentic spirituality and tells us that the problem of hypocrisy among the religious is not the mismatch of principle and action but of true spirituality and external demonstrations of spirituality.

2. **The second aspect.** The hypocrite is **he who accuses in others what he excuses in himself.** He is the one who ignores the plank sticking out of his own eye while trying to remove the speck out of his neighbor's eye (Matt 7:3-5; Lk 6:42).

This use of "hypocrite" is preceded by Jesus' warning against how we judge others. It is easy to engage in censorious judgment. But Jesus warns us that God will judge us by the same judgment we use to judge others (Matt 7:1-2; Lk 6:37-38). Unless we want God to deal harshly with us, we cannot afford to judge others harshly. The hypocrite wants different rules for others and himself. He accuses in others what he excuses in himself.

3. **The third aspect. Duplicity is sometimes called hypocrisy.** Jesus' enemies tried to charm him so he would incriminate himself as he answered their question. Their lack of sincerity in their question and their duplicity earned them the title "hypocrites" (Matt 22:18; Mk 12:15).

In today's world, we do not regularly classify malicious entrapment as hypocrisy. But the concept here goes beyond our use of words. There are Christians who delight in tale bearing, in backbiting, in ensnaring others, in rumor mongering, in making false accusations, and in seeing others fall. Such actions usually require duplicity and pretense of friendship as the trap is set. Jesus denounces such duplicitous entrapment as hypocrisy.

4. **The fourth aspect.** Insincerity is found everywhere. But it is most shameful when seen among Christians. **A pretense at love is hypocrisy** (Rm 12:9; 1 Tim 4:2; Jas 3:17). Christians are called upon to love one another by which the world will know we are disciples of Jesus Christ. Like the Jews who pretended spiritual content through religious correctness, Christians are very quick to modify hypocrisy for our own context. We do not have

observances to mark us out as spiritual. What we have is the command to love. The more dynamic the demand (love) the deeper our dissimulation. We can develop the art of pretending to love without actual loving. That is hypocrisy.

We rarely think of pretentious love as hypocrisy, yet it can be hypocrisy at its worst. Selfishness feigned as love is dishonoring to God. It is a deeper and more subtle hypocrisy than what the world charges us.

Dealing with Hypocrisy

The people in the world love to call us hypocrites. We may indeed be guilty of hypocrisy as they define it. But the world is also hypocritical in its judgment. They will accuse us what they excuse in themselves. They will heap acclaim on a person who produces a movie about global warming (Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*) which has serious errors or assumptions but will excuse his opulent lifestyle. (On the errors: UK High Court judge Burton ruled that Gore made 9 claims or false connections that depart from the mainstream scientific community. [BBC, October 11, 2007]).

I am not suggesting there is no global warming. What I am pointing out is the hypocrisy of the secular global community. The decision of the Nobel Prize Committee has tarnished their otherwise sterling reputation.

Conversely, the world fails to call us hypocrites when they should. I am pro-life for sure. Today, we see pro-lifers doing many things to help mothers with unwanted pregnancies. But this was not always so. One powerful motivation to legalize abortion is the carnage of backroom abortions in the past. If Christians had come to the support of these unwanted pregnancies in the past, the move to abortion might not have enough support to become legalized. It took the legalization of abortion for us to get off our high judgment chair and to start doing something about unwanted pregnancies. If abortion were to become illegal again, where will we find ourselves in helping those with unwanted pregnancies? Perhaps we need to see if there is hypocrisy in us that has contributed to the

current wanton destruction of human life. Perhaps we are no less responsible for all the terminated pregnancies because we failed to help those in their time of need.

We are often guilty of hypocrisy as the Bible defines it. But the world does not take us to task on that because they don't define hypocrisy the same way. The fact that the world fails to identify our hypocrisy does not mean we neglect the freedom we can have in authentic faith. Hypocritical faith is enslavement. To be authentic in faith allows us to proclaim an ideal while admitting that there is disparity between that ideal and our own action.

Then as now, our greatest hypocrisy is our pretense at spirituality and love. Too few have a conscious daily walk with God but too many pretend they do. Too few truly love, but too many pretend they do. If we can address these core hypocrisies in our life, we will address the disparity that God is truly concerned about.

Consistency is almost never on account of having lived up to our principles. It is almost always on account of modeling principles to actions. Consistency comes when we lower our standards, because we will never consistently live up to God's standards.

A word is determined by usage. If the world today calls us hypocrites because of our inevitable disparity between the ideal and the real, we are stuck. Disparity between principle and action is not hypocrisy in the biblical sense.

At the same time, we need to call the world to task on their hypocrisy of modeling their principles based on their actions. We also need to call them to task for condemning in us what they excuse in themselves.

If we spend our best energies on confronting our reputation in the world we would miss out on God's blessings for us. We need to confront hypocrisies in our own life as God has revealed to us in his word. This will go a long way in re-educating a biased world.

There are four identifiable areas of hypocrisy on which we can apply our best efforts: (1) authentic faith, (2) impartial and gracious judgments, (3) sincere, not duplicitous dealings, and (4) genuine love.

We are not necessarily hypocrites when we fail to live up to our principles. But we become hypocrites when we deny our disparity and pretend our ideals. We become hypocrites when our façade of holiness replaces our spiritual fight for holiness. We become hypocrites when a pretentious love takes priority over a genuine love.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.