

# Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

## Sermon Series: Show Stoppers

### **Hypocrisy?**

(Matthew 23)

Study #5

#### Introduction: unChristian faith...

Several months ago I read a book that deeply impacted me. I've referred to it before and have recommended it to you. It is a book put out by the Barna Research Group (published by Baker Books) called unChristian.

Written by David Kinnaman<sup>1</sup> and Gabe Lyons<sup>2</sup>, unChristian reports the findings of some pretty intensive research on the picture young adults in America have about Christianity based on what they see in Christians.

And what is the bottom line from unChristian? According to Kinnaman and Lyons, "*It's not a pretty picture.*"<sup>3</sup>

Based on this research, you can pretty well bet that a non-believing young adult who finds out that you are a Christian thinks that you are:

- **judgmental** (you look down on people who disagree with you);
- **too political** (you are overly motivated by a political agenda);
- **sheltered** (you are old-fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality; you respond to complex issues with simplistic solutions; you are not willing to get involved in the messiness of people's lives);
- **antihomosexual** (the automatic assumption is that you are hateful and bigoted toward gays and lesbians);

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<sup>1</sup> President of the Barna Research Group

<sup>2</sup> Founder of Fermi Project

<sup>3</sup> Page 15.

- **too focused on getting converts** (you make people feel like targets rather than people; your motives are suspect when you seek to evangelize).<sup>4</sup>

I don't know about you, but I find this research kinda discouraging. But the list I just gave is not all the bad news there is. Included in their research is one perception that hits especially hard.

Most young adults outside the faith (and a large majority of those in the church) believe, overall, that Christians are **hypocrites**.<sup>5</sup>

This may not surprise you. You may have the same sense that the church is riddled with hypocrites. Or, being an insider, you may have been accused of hypocrisy.<sup>6</sup>

But the accusation of hypocrisy is not a light thing. Something very important issue at stake when we Christians are charged with hypocrisy. And this is what is at stake: that when hypocrisy is seen in the church, people are suspicious that Christianity must not be true.

I propose that we take a few minutes this morning to talk about the elephant in the room and address the issue of hypocrisy in Christianity.

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<sup>4</sup> 87% find Christians judgmental; 75% believe we are too political; ~75% find us "sheltered"; 91% believe that we hate homosexuals.

<sup>5</sup> 85% of outsiders believe this.

<sup>6</sup> This accusation can take a variety of forms. "Too many Christians I know are phonies. If that's what Christianity is all about, why should I become a Christian?" or "If Christians are really concerned about others, why don't they show it?" or "Some non-Christians I know seem to live better lives than a lot of people who go to church - doesn't this show that Christianity isn't all it claims to be?" or "How can people who profess to be Christians still be full of racial hatred, materialism, and social insensitivity? Many churchgoers seem to have holier-than-thou attitudes. Why should I join the ranks of the self-righteous?"

## Hypocrisy Through a Telescope

### Origin of the Word

*From the Greek theatre...*

Now the words “hypocrisy” and “hypocrite” derive from the ancient Greek world. Several hundred years before Jesus was born, the word was used to describe someone who played a part on stage in a play.<sup>7</sup>

It was the practice in Greek theatre for actors to wear masks (the kind you still see on playbills today). The actor would speak through the mask as he pretended to be someone he really was not. The actor was called a *hupokrites* - no insult intended.

As the years passed, though, the meaning of “hypocrite” morphed into something derogatory.

*...to the New Testament*

The New Testament authors picked up on the morphed idea and used the word as a stinging accusation against people who put on a “mask” (not a real mask) and pretended to be something different, something better than, they really were.

It is important to note that hypocrisy is not a general term for all sin. It is a particular kind of sin, just like greed is a sin; lying is a sin; murder is a sin. So, hypocrisy is a sin.

And hypocrisy is the sin of pretending to have character or morals or beliefs that we really do not have.

While it is accurate to say that all hypocrisy is sin, it is not true that all sin is hypocrisy. Another way to say it is that while all Christians (and all people) sin<sup>8</sup>, not all Christians practice the specific sin of hypocrisy.

I can stand up here on Sunday mornings and preach about all kinds of sins and NOT be a hypocrite, even if I struggle with those sins. All I have to do to avoid hypocrisy is simply admit that I struggle.

I become a hypocrite when I tell you that I’ve conquered an area of sin where I actually still struggle.

Whenever I try, however subtly, to convince you that I’ve got my stuff together, that I’ve got this Jesus lifestyle pretty well wired, that sin is no longer a real struggle for me, at that moment that I have become a hypocrite.

So, to avoid the sin of hypocrisy, let me assure you that sin is not something that, as a 50-something, I don’t wrestle with anymore.

- I hate pornography with a passion because of the damage it does to all concerned - but I still struggle with the temptation to lust.
- I believe in the importance and the power of prayer with all my heart - and still do not have a prayer life that I would hold up as exemplary.
- I am convinced that **“God will supply all my needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 4:19) - and yet I still struggle to resist the temptation to worry about the future.

Of course this is not a comprehensive catalogue of the sins with which Dave Smith wrestles. But it is probably enough to convince you that I don’t think I’ve arrived at perfection. I haven’t arrived. I know I haven’t arrived. I want you to know that I know that I haven’t arrived.

Masks are ugly, pointless, and counterproductive to real growth. Hypocrisy is ugly.

And you can search literature, both ancient and modern and you won’t find anybody who has harsher words for hypocrisy than Jesus Christ.

### **Jesus, on Hypocrisy (Matthew 23)**

One day, during the last week of His life, Jesus was speaking to His disciples and others in the Jerusalem Temple. At one point He let fly with a series of rebukes against the religious leaders of His day.

Listen to what Jesus says to those who were guilty of hypocrisy.

<sup>7</sup> Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon, p. 1885-1886.

<sup>8</sup> See 1 John 1:8, 10

*[Matthew 23:2]...“The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; [3] therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. [4] They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. [5] But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men... [6] They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, [7] and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men...*

*[13] “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people...[14] [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]*

*[15] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves....*

*[23] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness...[24] “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!*

*[25] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. [26] “You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.*

*[27] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. [28] So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

*[29] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, [30] and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ [31] So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. [32] Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. [33] You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Jesus also spoke out strongly against hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5) and at Matthew 15:7, 22:18 and 24:51. Also, at Mark 7:6; 12:15 and Luke 6:42; 12:1, 56 and 13:15.

Clearly, Jesus hated the sin of hypocrisy. And there are lots of other places in the Bible - Old Testament and New - that speak out against hypocrisy.<sup>10</sup> God has always detested hypocrisy and wherever there is hypocrisy in the church, it deeply grieves the heart of Jesus, the Lord of the church.

Nevertheless, hypocrisy is a sin that has not been rooted out of the church. It is in the church. It is in our church.

How does it happen that hypocrisy has infiltrated the church? Well, I have to say that sometimes, the hypocrisy in the church is committed by people who are not Christians.

### Hypocrisy Under the Microscope

#### Does Hypocrisy Invalidate Christianity?

*Hypocrisy committed by “professors”*

This may be well understood by everyone here, but I still think it is worth saying. Attending a church is no guarantee that a person is a Christian.

There are lots of people who attend church, often regularly, even participating in Bible studies and serving on committees, who have not placed their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. And it is that, FAITH IN JESUS, that makes a person a Christian.

Just as we wouldn’t disparage the entire medical community because an unlicensed quack sold us some snake oil, so we shouldn’t disparage Christianity by the hypocrisy of those who are not Christians!

The truth is that some people are just playing church. Some are just religious. They are *professors*, not *possessors*.

Now, am I saying that REAL Christians never commit the sin of hypocrisy? NO. I am not.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 12:9; Galatians 2:13; 1 Tim. 4:2; James 3:17; 1 Peter 2:1. The prophets of the Old Testament continually denounced religious orthodoxy and formalism that lacked inner reality. See Isaiah 29:13; Proverbs 26:23-26; Isaiah 1:13-17; Jeremiah 7:8-10; 9:8; Amos 5:21-24

Genuine believers can and do fall prey to the temptation to pretend that they are more “together” than they really are. And there are all kinds of reasons we might succumb to this temptation.

*Hypocrisy committed by “possessors”*

We might yearn for acceptance from others, so put on a veneer of spirituality, hiding any dark sides of our lives, so that our Christian friends will highly regard us.<sup>11</sup>

Or we may love the intellectual pursuit of theology, but have little appetite for God Himself, hypocritically allowing people think that we are all about God.

Or, we may make a promise, a solemn vow, and have no real intention of keeping that vow.

Christians are sometimes guilty of the sin of hypocrisy. But does the reality of hypocrisy in the church invalidate Christianity? No. It does not!

*Answering [somewhat analytically] the problem of hypocrisy*

Coming to Christ is the anti-hypocrisy move

First of all, for a person to become a Christian, he or she must become the opposite of a hypocrite!

Turning to Christ is the ultimate anti-hypocrisy move. It involves acknowledging that we have no merit of our own and that we must accept the grace that God provides to those who come to Christ.

Like the bumper sticker says, Christians do not claim to be perfect, only perfectly forgiven by the One who is perfect - Jesus!

Real, changed lives are out there

I would also want to say, in defense of Christianity (and hopefully not too defensively), that for every example of hypocrisy in the church, we could produce multiple counterexamples of genuinely transformed lives.

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<sup>11</sup> See Matthew 6:1ff.

No one will deny that history records some incidents we wish had never happened. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the well-publicized sins of televangelists, our own misdeeds.<sup>12</sup>

But where the Gospel has spread it has led to incalculable benefits for millions of people on every level - spiritual, social, intellectual, physical. So, while hypocrisy is present, it is, arguably, not all-pervasive.

The issue is Jesus, not us!

Finally, and to be perfectly clear, the issue that determines the validity of Christianity is not the behavior of Christians. It is the Person of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

If you have something against hypocrisy, you and Jesus have something important in common: so does He! And why would you or anyone else let something you and Jesus agree on keep you away from Him?

I hope that you will not miss out on a relationship with Jesus due to someone else’s hypocrisy! What a tragedy it would be to let resentment over someone’s hypocrisy prevent you from receiving Jesus’ priceless gift of eternal salvation.

Now, at this point, I want to change gears from what has been, admittedly, a somewhat analytical look at hypocrisy. From what I’ve said so far, I might be open to the charge of speaking a bit intellectually about a highly charged topic. Emotions run high when the charge of hypocrisy is leveled against Christians.

So, in changing gears, I mean that I want to explore our theme a bit more personally, a bit less cerebrally.

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<sup>12</sup> Pascal wrote, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

<sup>13</sup> Quoting Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, “Attack me - I do this myself! - but attack me rather than the path I follow and which I point out to anyone who asks me where I think it lies. I know the way home and am walking along it drunkenly. Is it any less the right way because I am staggering from side to side?!”

It is true that hypocrisy among Christians does not invalidate Christianity. That's because the Christian faith is not all about Christians behaving well. It's all about the truth claims of Jesus.

Having said that, though, I don't think anybody will deny that hypocrisy does serious damage.

Jesus was certainly aware of the damage hypocrisy does. That's why He spoke out against it so frequently and so strongly. And you and I need to reckon with the damage done when we flirt with the sin of hypocrisy.

There are at least three streams of reality at work in churches and among Christians today that make hypocrisy a valid accusation and that make hypocrisy so damaging to Christianity's credibility.

The first stream is that of behavior.<sup>14</sup>

### Does Hypocrisy Damage Christianity?

*The difference between Christians and non-Christians*

#### Problem #1: Behavior

When putting together the book unChristian, the Barna Research Group conducted an extensive series of surveys designed to explore the difference between Christian and non-Christian behavior. The surveys explored more than one hundred variables related to values, behaviors and lifestyles, including both religious and nonreligious areas of life.

Barna's research touched on such items as a propensity to gamble, visit a pornographic website, take something that did not belong to them, consult a medium or psychic, physically fight or abuse someone, consume enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, use an illegal drug, lie, seek revenge on someone for a wrong suffered, and gossip.

The difference? According to the research there was **no statistically significant difference** between Christians and non-Christians in these and other categories.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Much of what follows is taken from the book, unChristian.

<sup>15</sup> In case you think that Barna may have been using a watered-down definition of "Christian" in his survey, those who were listed as a Christian had made a personal

Now, there were some areas where there was a marked difference. Christians attended church with greater frequency, owned more Bibles and donated more money to the church. But Christians failed to display much attitudinal or behavioral evidence of transformed lives.<sup>16</sup>

The chapter in unChristian marked "Hypocrisy" is heart-breaking. It includes stories of abusive husbands who teach Bible studies, pastors whose "convictions" about certain things change with the church that is paying their salary, and single moms who encountered heavy-handed advice on parenting, but without the offer of any assistance.

We are not that different than those around us. In many cases, and in many ways, our lives don't match our beliefs.

Behavior is one stream that contributes to the charge of hypocrisy. But our behavior only speaks to a part of the problem. There is another equally strong stream, and it is the stream of how we convey to others what our faith is all about.

#### Problem #2: The way we convey what the faith is all about

As much as we may have wanted to do it differently, we have managed to communicate that Christianity is all about lifestyle. By the vast majority of those outside the faith Christianity is perceived as a new and improved set of standards for living, a higher collection of rules, and regulations.

Where have they gotten this notion? Certainly not from the Bible!

Over and over again, the apostle Paul warned against defining Christianity by behavioral standards (Galatians 3:3; 5:1).

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faith commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important today; who believes that he/she will go to Heaven at death; who has confessed his/her sin and accepted Christ as personal Savior.

<sup>16</sup> According to Barna, there is something generational about this, too. Younger Christians are reshaping moral and sexual rules. Many (especially younger) Christians are living out their Christian faith with enormous moral laxity. There are huge gaps when it comes to the acceptability of sex outside of marriage, profanity, drunkenness, pornography, homosexual sex, and illegal drug use between younger and older Christians.

Behavioral changes do happen as people grow in Christ. But the changes flow out of transformed hearts, NOT vice versa.

Sadly, people have gotten this crazy idea that Christianity is all about lifestyle from us.

When outsiders think of us, they first think of our moralizing, our condemnations, our politics and our attempts to draw thick, dark lines around complex issues. They conclude that the Christian faith is all about how one lives.

By whatever means we have communicated this about Christianity, one thing is certain. Biblical Christianity is NOT primarily about a set of rules. It is first and foremost about a living relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ!

So, the first two streams contributing to our being tagged hypocrites are behavior and a rules-based orientation to the Christian life. The third stream is our lack of personal transparency.

### Problem #3: Lack of transparency

Sadly, we Christians are better known for trying to project a picture of having our stuff together than we are for being transparency about our struggles and failures.

We are tempted to wear masks and we frequently succumb to the temptation. It is so easy to fall for the ruse that it's somehow a better testimony for people to think that things are better with us than they really are, that we've tamed the "sin" monster.

And yet, this is hypocrisy's essence: failing to acknowledge the inconsistencies in our lives.

Taken together, it would be hard to envision a more awful scenario than when these three powerful streams reach the point of convergence.

*The difference "no difference" makes*

When we Christians:

- show little difference in behavior from non-Christians  
AND THEN
- define Christianity as being all about behavior and lifestyle  
AND THEN
- deny that we struggle with sin,

we create the "perfect **HYPOCRISY** storm"!

Clearly, pharisaic hypocrites are not winsome witnesses who will attract people to Jesus! And if people in our orbits are not flocking to Jesus, might it not be due - at least in part - to the witness we provide?

I think that is a tragic, painful, and reasonable assumption. And if that is the case, where do we go from here? What do we do IF, when we look in the mirror, we recognize the ugliness of hypocrisy?

I recommend first, a willingness to take off the mask.

### **A Way Forward - What if Christians Displayed...**

#### **Genuineness and Transparency**

Rather than try to hide our struggles and pretend that we've conquered sin, we could say this:

*"I am a new creation in Christ and Jesus is changing me. But I have not arrived at perfection. I still struggle with sin."*

There are few things more powerful than an honest confession of sin. Confession **liberates** the one who confesses, empowers **listeners** to admit their own struggles, and unleashes the power of God to further **transform** us.

Jud Wilhite is the pastor of Central Community Church, in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is also the author of a book called, Stripped, that tells of the ministry of his church among the least and the lost in the heart of Vegas.

Wilhite writes, “*We are certain to flip the perception of hypocrisy by being honest and straightforward about our faults and our hope for transformation in Jesus.*”

I’ve seen countless times in all kinds of settings how the Holy Spirit is willing to use the mighty tools of transparency, genuineness and disarming honesty for good in the lives of people who desperately need Jesus. Transparency requires courage - but it is so worth it!

Second, we can and should take the Bible’s commands about lifestyle seriously.

### **A Grace-Based Commitment to Integrity**

No, this is not the part where I take out a hammer, pound on Christians, and tell them to “shape up or ship out.”

Chances are that if there are glaring inconsistencies between what the Bible says and your own personal lifestyle, you know it, probably regret it, and probably would like to change.

The change comes, I believe, as we change our orientation from a focus on lifestyle to a focus on the amazing grace of God we have received.

Maybe you have fallen for the lie that Christianity is all about following a set of rules. Believe me, it is not! Christianity is about enjoying a living relationship with Almighty God through faith in Jesus Christ when what we deserved was HELL!

And rather than communicating that being a Christian is all about lifestyle, we say this:

*“I have received God’s amazing grace. He gave me what I didn’t deserve and because of Him I won’t get (Hell) what I do deserve. Because of what He has done for me, I’m eager to obey Him.”*

We won’t shed our hypocritical label if our lifestyles don’t reflect Jesus. This is a tough truth to think about, and we’ll never do it perfectly. But a joyous, grace-based pursuit of holiness is a key to a winsome witness and sounds the death knell to the charge of hypocrisy.

And third, we can express our faith in Jesus by showing genuine, radical love in the Name of Jesus.

### **Radical Love**

There is no life-changing power like the power of from-the-heart, Jesus-motivated, radical love. Caring for people at their point of need is transformational.

Coming up with a list of ways we could express radical love is both easy and impossible. Easy because the needs of people are so great; impossible because the list would be endless. What is required is extreme sensitivity, in the moment, to the people around us.

If I am going to love - really love - I must be willing to set aside my agenda for the day, my timetable, my resources, and simply serve in Jesus’ Name.

And when we love, we do something that puts the charge of hypocrisy to rest. We say:

*“I’ve tasted the perfect love of God through Jesus Christ. Now, I want to give you a taste of that same love and genuine care.”*

### **Conclusion:**

It may be that today, you have been struck with the reality that hypocrisy is a charge that could be leveled at you. If so, please understand that hypocrisy is not the unpardonable sin. It’s not necessarily any worse than other varieties of sin.

All sins have their own particular ugliness. Greed does, as does sexual sin as does gossip as does hypocrisy.

But like all sins, hypocrisy - if recognized - can be repented of and turned from. It is possible that today is the day that you will turn from the sin of hypocrisy.

I want to give one specific suggestion if you suspect that hypocrisy is something that someone in your world might say is something that you might need to address. The suggestion comes from Donald Miller's book, Blue Like Jazz.

In Blue Like Jazz, Miller writes of a time when he was living in Portland, Oregon and hanging with friends who attended classes at Reed College, a very selective liberal arts college, known for rigorous academics, extremely liberal politics, and general disdain for Christianity.

Every year at Reed there is a renaissance festival called Ren Fayre. Among other things, Ren Fayre provides a three day opportunity for extreme partying.

Well, one year, Donald Miller and friends decided that they would use the festival as an opportunity for Christian witness and set up a "Confession Booth" in the middle of campus in the middle of the Ren Fayre festival.

The idea gained traction. Ren Fayre began and the Christians built the booth with a sign advertising "Confess Your Sins".

Miller was the first of the Christians to man the booth. Soon, a curious Reed student walked up and asked, "*What are you guys doing? You expect me to confess my sins?*"

That's when Donald Miller explained that their confession booth was a confession booth with a twist. Every Reed student who came to the booth would listen as the Christian who was staffing the booth confessed his or her sin.

The booth gave the Christians an opportunity to confess what people had done in Jesus' Name through the centuries - Crusades, Inquisition, witch trials and famous televangelical misbehaviors. It gave them the chance to confess their own sins of lovelessness and insincerity and lack of care for the poor.

Confession. Admitting that you have been wrong. Choosing to go the other way.

If you have been guilty of the sin of hypocrisy - the sin of putting on a mask so that others will think things of you that are not really true - I call you to the liberating act of confession.

Tell God. Tell those in your world. And then continue with a life of transparency, a joyfully serious pursuit of holiness, and radical love.