

Christians are Hypocrites

Our family used to own a big yellow Dodge station wagon, the kind with the rear seat facing backwards so our children traveled America seeing where they had been. When the car was right around a hundred thousand miles, I sensed that there was something going wrong with the transmission so I took it to a transmission repair shop. The technician took it for a ride, put it up on the lift, charged me to check it out (saying that charge could be used toward any repair cost) and gave me the bad news that the transmission needed to be rebuilt. It would cost somewhere around a thousand dollars. It was a painful decision as it was a time when we could ill afford it, but there really wasn't much choice. So I authorized the repair and it was fixed. After that the car ran fine.

About a month later there was a noise that concerned me so I returned to the transmission shop and asked for help. The technician took the car for a drive. He put it up on the lift and he said that for about two hundred dollars he could tear it apart and find out what was wrong with it and not to worry that money would go toward any cost to rebuild the transmission. After he explained all this I said, "This transmission was completely rebuilt here in this shop last month." He said, "Oh. . . well it will be ready in half an hour and cost six dollars."

I have never gone back to that particular shop since that experience. To be honest, we sold that car and I've never really had transmission trouble again — but if I did have transmission trouble with my car I still doubt I would return to that shop. That's not a totally rational decision because in all probability that employee doesn't work there anymore. It's probably a good place; they probably do a good job; and that probably was the exception. It really isn't a logical thing. It isn't rational; it's mostly emotional. It's kind of relational because I felt betrayed. I felt that I should have gotten better than I actually got.

There are many people who have a similar response to Christianity for much the same reasons. They have had bad experiences with Christians and as a result have rejected the Christian faith. The objection is most often stated in the simple accusation that Christians are hypocrites. That's a serious accusation. It's a serious objection. Because, after all, if Christianity doesn't work to transform the lives of those who are already Christians then what are the chances that

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Sometimes the objection is based on that which is really quite trivial. Someone misspoke and that has been exaggerated over a period of years until it has been turned into an excuse rather than a genuine reason. Probably, more often than not, there really has been misbehavior, hypocrisy or something far more serious. So unbelievers may say, "Well, I know some Christians who have done some terrible things. Why, my boss talks about Christian faith a lot but he has become a very rich man essentially by underpaying his employees and taking advantage of other people who are far less fortunate than he is. If that's what a Christian is, then I don't want to be a Christian." And then someone else joins in the conversation and says, "Well frankly, that reminds me of my mother. You know everybody thought that she was this super holy saint. Everybody around the neighborhood and in the community would tell me what a great privilege it was to have her as my mother. But at home she was mean; she was vindictive, unpredictable and often terribly cruel." Then another person joins the conversation and says, "Yeah, like my father. My father was a leader in the church but at home during the week he would beat up my mother. He would beat up me. Sometimes we wouldn't go to church on Sunday mornings because we didn't want people to see the bruises and to find out what he had done." The conversation continues and the accusations become more serious. Another person adds, "Well, in the church in which I grew up, the

pastor would preach these wonderful sermons Sunday after Sunday. Everybody thought he was so smart and so funny and so articulate and then after all of these years everybody discovered

that he had been molesting boys in the Sunday School and in the youth group. He was caught and sent to prison." Then everybody joins in and says, "And what about these celebrities, these famous religious leaders who it turns out are having affairs or stealing money or ripping off the savings of poor elderly people with their fund raising solicitations?" Or, "What about the fact that some of the greatest racist atrocities have been committed by people who claim to believe in Jesus Christ and often have said what they have said and done the horrible things they have done under the

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banner of the cross of Jesus Christ? People who say they are Christians but in their private moments repeat the ugliest jokes and the worst slurs?”

There are many who say that such things have led them to conclude that they don't want anything to do with that kind of religion. Who in their right mind would believe in Christianity if that's the way Christians are? And to be truthful, there are people who have chosen to live what they consider to be far more moral lives, better lives than the lives of the Christians whom they have known.

As a Christian I want to respond to those who object. I think, at least for starters, it is important to talk about what a hypocrite actually is. A hypocrite is a pretender. In fact, our English word hypocrite comes almost letter for letter and sound for sound from the Greek word that is the word for a stage actor. Someone on the stage is a pretender. He or she pretends to be someone that that actor is not. But in this case we're not talking about someone who is on the stage in a theatrical performance. We're talking about someone who is pretending to be in real life what that person is not. It may be that the person accused of being a hypocrite may not, in fact, be a Christian at all. It may well be that the misbehavior is so unchristian because of the fact that that person is not a Christian.

There is another way of looking at this but I admit that it is sort of a strange spin to put on the subject. There is a sense in which a hypocrite is a counterfeit and that which is a counterfeit is an attestation to that which is real. Obviously counterfeiters don't make seven dollar bills because there is no such thing. In fact, counterfeiters don't typically make one dollar bills because they have such minimal value. The most commonly counterfeited U.S. currencies are twenty dollar bills and one hundred dollar bills. If the real thing doesn't exist it is hardly worth faking it. The fact that people fake being Christians is because Christianity is real — has real value — and it is worth trying to copy.

At the same time that the accusations are being made, it is important to confess that Christians are sinners, current sinners. In fact, it is impossible to become a Christian without first admitting to being a sinner and confessing that sin to God. After all, Christians are those who say that Jesus Christ is our Savior and the only person who needs a Savior is someone who is a sinner. If a person is not a sinner obviously there is no need for salvation so Christians are those who have turned to Jesus Christ to be saved from their sin.

Unfortunately, the sin does not stop at the moment that a person becomes a Christian. It is not as if God

reaches down and turns off the faucet of sin. It may be turned down, it may be reduced, but in fact it is a life long process where we sin less and less and become more and more like Jesus Christ. The Bible is quite clear about this. In I John 1:8-2:2 it says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Anyone who's a Christian, and these words incidentally are written to Christians, anyone who

claims to be without sin is a liar. Now the remedy is in verse 9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and

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just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” But, “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

So the Bible explains that any Christian who claims not to have sinned is a liar. A real Christian is someone who has accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, has been born again. Their life has been transformed and the problem of sin has been resolved as far as heaven is concerned but the problem of sin in this life on earth will take some more time. That doesn't mean that Christians are supposed to sin. Obviously the Bible is never saying that. However, we do sin and therefore God has provided a way to clear away that sin through repeated confession of it and acceptance of God's forgiveness.

Getting back to the main point, that is then to say, Christians sin. Christians make mistakes. Christians are not perfect. Christians have not yet become all that God intends for us to be. However, there is a huge difference between being a sinner and being a hypocrite. A hypocrite is someone who pretends, alleges, to be something that that person is not. A genuine Christian says, “Jesus Christ is my Savior but, yes, I have an ongoing issue of sin in my life that God is working on to resolve.” The hypocrite pretends to be something that he is not. He is two-faced.

To be fair in all this talk about hypocrites, it is important to look at positive examples. Yes, there are counterfeits, but they are outnumbered hundreds to one by real Christians. I've been a Christian a lot of years and I have met thousands and thousands of other Christians and my over-all experience is that I've been simply amazed by them. I have repeatedly seen people

whose lives were terrible and have been changed for good. I've seen people up against the most horrible situations who have behaved in ways which I know that they were not otherwise humanly capable of behaving. I have seen people who have been harshly treated who have literally and figuratively turned the other cheek, who have shown love to enemies. I've seen it again and again.

While it is true that there are Christians who blatantly and tragically sin against God and others, who are hypocrites, it is possible to parade a much larger number of positive examples of Christians who live good and Godly lives, who are wonderful proofs of the validity of the difference that Jesus Christ makes in a person's life.

But all other responses aside, hypocrites do not invalidate Jesus Christ. If he is who he claimed to be, then he is genuinely worthy of our faith whether there are hypocrites or not. Suppose you go to visit your physician. The doctor takes you into his office, sits you down and says, "I need to have a very direct and blunt conversation with you. There are two things you need to do. First, you need to lose 40 pounds. Secondly, you need to quit smoking. If you don't do both, you are going to have severe illness and it will cost you your life." At first you are taken back by the bluntness. But then you have something rolling through the back of your mind that bothers you. First of all, he's a hundred pounds over weight. Second of all, you see a pack of cigarettes in his pocket. You think to yourself, "Why should I lose weight? Why doesn't he lose a hundred pounds and then we'll talk about it. Why doesn't he quit smoking and then we'll discuss the subject? I'm not going to do it. So there!" In a more rational moment you might realize that the doctor's advice was good in spite of his hypocrisy.

So it is with the validity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Don't reject the message because you don't like the messenger and certainly do not reject Jesus Christ because of the hypocrisy of some Christian. The Bible itself speaks out on this issue. In Matthew 23:13 Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, very religious legalistic people, and he said to them, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites." Now this wasn't a private conversation. This was out in public. And he named who they were. "Woe to you. . . you hypocrites. You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." Jesus went on public record that these very religious

Pharisees were hypocrites and they weren't going to be allowed into the kingdom of God for they were blocking the way for other people to get into the kingdom of God.

If you want another very interesting New Testament spin, look at Philippians 1:15-18. Here St. Paul is teaching about hypocrites and he has a completely different angle. He's writing while in prison in Rome and reflecting on what is happening with the new young church around the empire and the growing but still small number of Christians. He says in Philippians 1:15, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here (in prison), for the defense of the gospel. The former (the hypocrites), preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." So what does Paul think of this? He says, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached."

Clearly Paul did not want them to have bad motives. He did not want them to be selfish. He did not want them to cause trouble for him. But he decided to look on the bright side and to rejoice over every time the gospel of Jesus Christ was communicated, even if the people who were doing it were hypocrites. Even if their motivations were wrong. In other words, he was able to distinguish the very good message from the very bad messengers.

No one should miss out on the gospel of Jesus Christ or on becoming a Christian because of hypocrites. Frankly, the hypocrites aren't worth it. They shouldn't be given that kind of credence and value.

All of that having been said, some words need to be said to those who are Christians. As Christians it is extremely

important that we practice what we profess. We do not want to be hypocrites. We need to realize that the Christian life is not a game; it is not something on a stage. It is real and it is significant and it is important that we live consistently, matching up what we say we believe and the way we live.

The Bible is very-straight forward about this in the book of James. James, you may know or recall, was a half brother of Jesus. He was concerned about people who say they have faith but don't act like it. James 2:14-19 says:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith

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save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder.

James is saying here that if you want to make comparisons, look at the demons — the followers of Satan — they have pretty good theology. They believe in God, they understand all this — but they have evil behavior.

To be a Christian is to have behavior that is consistent with the beliefs of what it is to be a Christian. It is hypocrisy to say one thing and to do another thing. Please don't be a Christian and then turn around and mistreat other people. Don't claim to be a Christian and then have sex outside of marriage. Don't claim to be a Christian and then steal from an employer or cheat on an income tax return. Don't claim to be a Christian and then be selfish or greedy with money and other possessions.

To be a Christian is to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In the first and second century there was a very popular civil expression, "Caesar is Lord." In fact, in many parts of the Roman empire, saying it was required by law. The Christians picked up on that and they switched a word. They wouldn't say, "Caesar is Lord," they would say, "Jesus is Lord." But James was saying that it wasn't enough to just say the words; we need to live the way Jesus Christ wants us to live.

The primary reason for living Christianly is for the sake of God. However, it is also important for every Christian to recognize that our behavior impacts others. One of the most frequent questions I ask when I get to know people at Wooddale Church is, "How did you first come to Wooddale Church?" I've gotten some wonderful stories, but this was perhaps the most memorable of all. A man told me that he was going through a difficult time in his life — he knew he needed something, but he didn't know exactly what he needed. He was working at a large multi-national company based here in the Twin Cities and in his searching for answers he observed the lives of his coworkers. After many months of doing this, he concluded that there were four people that stood out as different. He then sought opportunities to have private conversations with each of them and, as subtly as he could, asked them why they were the way they were. In every one of those cases, each of those people said, "It is because I'm a

Christian." Out of those conversations he was invited to Wooddale Church and he himself became a Christian with personal faith in Jesus Christ.

What impresses me is that for months those coworkers did not know that they were being watched. He was looking at the way they dressed, the way they did their work, the way they dealt with difficulty, the vocabulary they used, what time they came to work and what time they left. Everything about them. He was profoundly impressed by who they were and they didn't even know that he was looking.

There's a story here for us all. Our lives greatly impact other people — our families, our neighbors, all the people with whom we work with. As Christians it is extremely important to be aware of the impact we have on other people, both positive and negative. For if our lives are not consistent with what we profess, if we live immorally and unbiblically, then our behavior impacts the lives of our children, of our employees, of our employer, or coworkers and friends and even our enemies. May our prayer be that no one be turned away from Jesus Christ because of the sinful misbehavior of any of us who claims Jesus Christ as Savior.

One final word. And that is for anyone who has been distracted from Jesus Christ because of the hypocrisy of another. I want to apologize to you. I'm sincerely sorry that that happened. I invite you to take your eyes off of the hypocrite, off of the person who hurt you, as deep as that hurt may be, and turn to Jesus Christ himself. I assure you that while that other person may have disappointed you more than words can describe, Jesus Christ will never disappoint you. And for everyone who claims to be a Christian, I urge you to live like Jesus Christ.

It's a popular trend right now to wear necklaces and bracelets with the initials WWJD which is an abbreviation for "What would Jesus do?" No matter what your circumstances or trauma, that is the question to ask and when you have the answer, that is the way to live.

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