

Sin, Hypocrisy, and the Church

By David Phillips

Hypocrisy has been a problem in the church ever since the days of the apostles. We read about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter five. Even the apostle Peter, who was otherwise known as a faithful man, was at one point guilty of hypocrisy according to Gal. 2:11-17. Throughout history this kind of character has been observed in the church by both Christians and non-Christians alike. Because of this, many people have refused to attend church services, claiming that they do not feel comfortable worshipping God in the midst of such hypocrisy. But are their objections justified? Are all Christians hypocrites? The answer to this is an emphatic no. Though it cannot be denied that hypocrisy is an evil that every Christian and every congregation struggles with on a day-to-day basis, what we must learn is how to tell the difference between faithfulness and hypocrisy, and the difference between one who is actively struggling against sin and one who is simply covering up his/her sins. When we learn how to deal with sin in a godly manner, then we will be better able to avoid the destructive influence of hypocrisy. *"For what is the hope of the hypocrite, though he may gain much, if God takes away his life?"* (Job. 27:8).

Many claim that there is hypocrisy in the church because they have a preconceived notion that in order to be a Christian one must be sinless. The sad truth is that this is impossible, for all men sin (Rom. 3:23). There is not one person who has walked on the earth, aside from Jesus, who has not sinned. Therefore, the church is made up of flawed, sinful people who continue to struggle against sin every day of their lives. This is a sad fact, but it is the truth and God teaches us that we must be willing to admit this truth if we hope to have a relationship with Him. *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us"* (1 John 1:8-10).

Why is it important for us to understand this? Because, too often we tend to build up this grand image of the church as a pristine body of sinless people who live good lives and have very few problems. Rather, the opposite is true. The church is in fact a body of people whose lives have been riddled with sin but whom God has washed and sanctified through Jesus Christ so that by His grace alone they are able to serve Him in righteousness. And that, not because they are righteous in themselves, but because God has made them righteous by taking away the guilt of their sins. *"...Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish"* (Eph. 5:25-27).

Since God is the One who cleanses Christians from their sins, does that mean Christians can continue living in sin? Absolutely not! As Paul said in Rom. 6:1-4, *"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should*

walk in newness of life." Through Christ Jesus, Christians are freed from their sins and become servants of God. *"But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness"* (Rom. 6:17-18). Therefore, even though God is the One who cleanses us from our sins, it is our responsibility to strive to serve Him with our lives by overcoming sin.

Let us understand, therefore, that faithful Christians are not those who have already attained perfection, but are those who continually strive to overcome their sins as servants of God. This is the point that Paul makes in Phil. 3:12-14, *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

Therefore, hypocrisy is not the presence of sin in the life of a Christian. Rather, it is the failure to acknowledge and to repent of one's sins. Christians who pretend to be perfect by either ignoring or hiding their sins are hypocrites because they are pretending to be something that they are not. Jesus illustrated this kind of character in the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:10-13. The Pharisee was being a hypocrite because he thought that he was sinless, as he said, *"God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector."* In contrast, the tax collector showed humility, *"And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'"* Even though the Pharisee appeared to be righteous, Jesus said that the tax collector was justified rather than he because, even though the tax collector was a sinner, he was willing to acknowledge his sin and seek forgiveness by God's grace. He humbled himself before God.

When we fail to acknowledge our own sins then we, like the Pharisee, begin to focus on the faults of other people. Rather than humbling ourselves in the sight of God, we exalt ourselves above other men, believing that we are better than them. We are quick to overlook our own sins, but are quick to pounce on those who commit the same sins as we. Paul condemned this kind of behavior in Rom. 2:21-22, saying, *"You therefore who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery?"*

There are many Christians who may not necessarily condemn the sins of others, but simply refuse to confess their own sins for fear of what other people might think of them. This too is hypocrisy because by refusing to confess our sins we are putting on the facade that we are without sin. Because of our pride we fail to humble ourselves in the sight of God (James 4:10). Again, we pretend to be something that we are not.

If Christians are to avoid hypocrisy, then rather than pretending to be perfect, they must be willing to humble themselves by acknowledging and confessing their sins (Acts 19:18-19). Therefore, we are commanded, *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (James 5:16-17). There are many Christians who, because they are filled with pride, will not confess their sins. Let us understand that if we are unwilling to humble ourselves and fulfill this command then truly we are hypocrites.

God's Solution to Sin and Hypocrisy

How can we continue to struggle against sin in our lives and in the church while avoiding hypocrisy? God shows us in the Scriptures. Let us therefore pursue the wisdom of God that we might avoid hypocrisy and live as true followers of Christ.

James 4:7-10: *"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."* We must begin by correcting our attitude. The thing that prevents us from making our hearts right with God is pride. If we are to avoid hypocrisy and overcome our sins we must have the humility to submit to God and to seek help with our struggles.

James 5:16-17: *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"*. Setting aside our pride, it is important that we seek help from our brethren, especially when dealing with difficult sins. We can find many excuses as to why we should not have to do this, but when it comes down to it, the only reason to not obey this command is our own sinful pride. This same pride is at the very foundation of hypocrisy.

1 Cor. 12:20-26: One of the things that prevents Christians from confessing their sins one to another is the fact that some Christians, rather helping others in meekness, use the sins of others as a club to beat them with. There are few things more destructive to the body of Christ than this. Therefore, Paul teaches those members who seem to be stronger to humble themselves and to acknowledge the fact that they need the weaker members as much as the weaker members need them.

Gal. 6:1-2: *"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."* We must learn to have the same concern for our brethren as we have for ourselves. When we learn to acknowledge our own faults, then we will be better able to help others. It is not hypocrisy to strive to help others overcome sin. Rather, it is Christ. For Jesus died on the cross to bring us salvation, but we must work together to help one another strive for that salvation. That is our fellowship in Christ. We are fellow laborers and part of our labor is overcoming sin. We are brothers and sisters—children of God—and as such we are striving to grow up together in Christ (Eph. 4:14-16).

Conclusion

God's people are in a constant battle against sin. Hypocrisy is the greatest hindrance in that battle. If we are to be victorious in Christ Jesus then we must humble ourselves and fulfill the will of God as we read it in His inspired word. Let us therefore heed the word of God which says in 1 John 1:9: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

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