

“The One Thing That Upsets Jesus More Than Anything Else”

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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September 1, 2024

A good friend who was a rugby player and thus had a reservoir of jokes, some of which I can tell from a pulpit, told this joke about hypocrisy. Some well-meaning soul was trying to encourage a friend to go to church. He told him about all the good things the church did and how it would help him, but the man said, “I don’t go to church because the place is filled with hypocrites!” “That may be,” said the well-meaning soul, “but that never kept you out of the bar down the street.”

It was a point well-taken. There are hypocrites everywhere, not just in the church, and there is some inconsistency within all of us, and thus, an element of hypocrisy. Yet before we become comfortable with the normalization of dysfunction, we might want to note that hypocrisy seems to be the one thing that upsets Jesus more than anything else.

He spends time with sinners of all stripes, welcoming them into his presence. He reaches out to the marginalized and helps them claim their status as children of God. But he vehemently chastises hypocrites, people who say one thing and do another, often religious leaders.

Consider our reading today from Mark 7. Some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem have come to check Jesus out, and they notice that his disciples are not following the tradition of ritual handwashing. So, they ask Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

It seems odd to us that they wouldn’t wash their hands, our mothers made sure we did, but the issue is not hygiene, it’s about being ritually clean. The world is divided into categories of clean and unclean, and if the disciples have been around anyone or anything that might be ritually impure, they need spiritual cleansing.

Where do they get this idea? Not from scripture, at least not entirely. It comes from the tradition of the elders, commentary on

scripture, which we might dismiss, but they view this tradition as almost equal to scripture. The Mishnah teaches that Moses received the tradition of the elders at Sinai and passed it down unmarred, by the prophets to the “men of the Great Synagogue” and then through authorized teachers and elders (Aboth 1:1).

Jesus does not condemn this tradition, but he does push back on how highly the Pharisees value it in comparison to how little attention they give scripture. “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites,” Jesus says, “As it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Jesus goes on to say it’s not what goes into a person but what comes out that matters because what is in our hearts leads to acts of love and justice or deeds of evil. He even names specifics – fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. It doesn’t matter how much God-talk we use, how often we sit on a pew or open a Bible; it doesn’t matter how many rules of artificial piety we follow, thinking we are better than others; it’s what’s in our heart that matters, Jesus says, whether we are devoted to the love of God and people or not. These religious leaders are not.

It is a scathing indictment of the kind of faith that is all talk and no action, that claims to be all about God but is actually self-serving, that is hypocritical to the core. Jesus clearly does not like hypocrisy.

Nor do many people today. In fact, the hypocritical nature of too much faith has perhaps the most significant negative impact on the witness of the church. Young people especially are turned off by the abundance of hypocrisy and the lack of genuine concern for people and issues that matter demonstrated by the church, most of all, the evangelical church, of which Baptists are a part.

Some of this hypocrisy takes the form of saying one thing and doing another. A pastor of another church I served was well known for preaching against the evils of alcohol. He dropped a goldfish into a bowl of some kind of alcohol at Vacation Bible School so that the

children could see how harmful it was. Clearly, he was not concerned about animal cruelty. Nor did he practice what he preached. I know this because an older man in my time there told me about the evenings after deacons meetings when this pastor would come by his house near the church, sit on the porch with him, smoke a cigar, and drink whiskey.

He had one set of expectations for others and another for himself, but that's how hypocrisy works. Consider the Southern Baptist Convention leaders who have railed against various kinds of sexual sin, as they define it, for years, only to have been found guilty of covering up their own acts of sexual harassment and abuse. There is no darker stain on the church than this kind of hypocrisy, and many of those making the most noise in the public square while claiming to be Christians, practice it. But there are Christians who live with integrity.

My college roommate's grandfather was a Nazarene pastor who was more conservative than me, but he was a kind soul with a genuine love for Christ, and he practiced what he preached. When he became a Christian, after a raucous adolescence, he gave up many things, including movies. He never went to see a movie, not even a Disney movie! I did not agree with some of his views, but I could not help but admire his integrity, he did not have a hypocritical bone in his body.

I also think of a member of the church I served in Winston-Salem. He was an oncologist who accomplished a great deal of good. He also owned a farm in the area which grew tobacco, like many farms in the south. One day, his wife, a Meredith graduate – you have to watch those women – suggested that it might not be wise for an oncologist to own a tobacco farm. It might look a bit hypocritical... He agreed, and proceeded to transform his land into a tree farm that has won awards for its ecological practices. We can choose integrity over hypocrisy.

But saying one thing and doing another is not the only way hypocrisy is expressed. In our text, the Pharisees and scribes focus on the wrong thing. They make a big deal about non-essentials that aren't in scripture while ignoring basic teachings and not giving their hearts to God. Faith is about an intimate relationship with God that shapes life. They talk a big game, but their faith is about following their own rules.

We experience this kind of hypocrisy too. It's what the founding pastor of the church I served in Winston-Salem, Jack Noffsinger, called putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable. The old rules of Southern piety fall into this category. "Don't drink, smoke, or chew, or go with those who do." Some of us remember those days. Dancing was off-limits too, as was playing cards on Sunday, in fact, most anything that even looked like it might be fun! Where did these "sacred rules" come from? Not the Bible, but various teachings and traditions.

And to be clear, alcohol can be abused, and it is good to have a day to focus on matters of faith. But Jesus drinks wine, David dances before the ark as an act of worship, and Sunday is not the Sabbath, it is the Lord's Day, the Day of Resurrection. Yet for the better part of a century, these were rules of faith, "good" people followed them.

There were similar rules about hair length and being clean shaven for men, and how women dressed. In one setting where I served, people in the church liked me much better when I moved the part in my hair from the center to the side. This made me more trustworthy. The wife of the pastor with whom I worked even asked Dana one Sunday, "Is Chris trying to sneak it back to the middle?" This was the standard of piety for those who at the very same time did not want people of color worshiping with us. That's hypocrisy, focusing on the wrong things.

And it's not just a thing of the past. Consider the obsession in public life many evangelicals have with certain moral issues that matter immensely but have little or no scripture to speak to them, like abortion and LGBT concerns, while they ignore issues to which scripture speaks often and clearly, like our calling to welcome the stranger or immigrant; to help the poor; to do justice, love kindness and walk *humbly* with God. We can feel strongly about these other issues, and have different views on them, but if we make them a litmus test of faith while ignoring the clear teaching of scripture, we are practicing hypocrisy.

There is one other manifestation of hypocrisy we need to note. It is not only about saying one thing and doing another, and focusing on the wrong things, it is about using a superficial standard of piety to establish a hierarchy of righteousness. This is what the Pharisees and

scribes do. Those who follow their human-made rules are the only true believers. Sound familiar? Everything about this approach reeks of hypocrisy. It is arrogant when we are called to be humble. It asserts a works-based view of salvation when we are saved by grace. And it creates tiers of holiness when the ground before the cross is level.

A character in a Flannery O'Connor short story embodies this kind of hypocrisy ("Revelation"). Ruby Turpin enters a doctor's waiting room and sizes up the odd collection of decent folk, white trash, and other misfits with whom she must share this space. She engages the one pleasant woman in the room in conversation and thanks God she was not born colored, white trash, or ugly. She is a good person, a faithful church lady, so she cries out in gratitude for her good fortune of being born who she is, "Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus thank you!"

At this very moment, a girl in her late teens named Mary Grace, an overweight child with acne and a student at Wellesley who has been staring at Mrs. Turpin in rage, throws the book she has been reading across the room and hits her in the face. Before anyone can react, she jumps on top of Mrs. Turpin and chokes her. When the doctor and nurse arrive, they pull her off our dear lady, hold her down, and sedate her.

Catching her breath, Ruby Turpin walks over to Mary Grace. She doesn't look familiar, but she is convinced she knows her. She bends down to see if she will tell her something and listens as if waiting for a revelation at which point Mary Grace says, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."

Mrs. Turpin sinks down in her chair. She doesn't know how to respond. Eventually she says through tears, "I am not, a wart hog. From hell," but her tone is not convincing. She is not as noble as she would like to believe. Something is missing and she begins to ponder what it is. It takes awhile, but she recognizes her self-righteousness, her tendency to look down on others, and she sees a vision of a different way of looking at others. She has a revelation that transforms her.

We all need one of those, something that enables us to see ourselves as we are with all our self-righteousness and hypocrisy, something that calls us to a better life, a more genuine faith. There is hypocrisy everywhere and in all of us, but we don't have to embrace it.