

11. Hypocrisy—Unethical and Immoral Acts of Mind and Body

The ethics and morality taught by Jesus begin in the change of heart that comes to those born again (John 3). In Matt 5:3ff, Jesus prescribes certain beatitudes that protect the Christian from the sins of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy itself, like greed and hate, generates yet other evil acts, forbidden of Christian. The beatitudes, which keep us from hypocrisy and these sins of heart, mind, and body, are from among those at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:3-8:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

It is impossible to conceive of one's possessing these spiritual qualities and still being beset by hypocrisy and the sins that attend it. Hypocrisy is playacting or pretense in the original form of the word; pretending to be something that we are not; insincere. The sin of hypocrisy brings into question the ability of one to act in moral and ethical ways. Hypocrisy casts doubt on the integrity of one's acts and words.

A Hypocrite Passing Judgment

Matt 7:1-5:

1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

A hypocrite will find fault with a brother, even though his own sin is worse. The Lord uses the speck of sawdust to indicate the brother's fault, which is minor in respect to the plank in one's own eye. Every time a Christian judges a brother, he is pretending that he has no equal or greater sin, that he is the judge (God is the judge), and that he would never be like the brother. The plank is the sin of hypocrisy – a sin greater than the sin that a brother might do.

The Lord has already identified some acts of hypocrisy in the sermon. Among them are these. In Matt 6:2, he identified the person who advertises his benevolence as a hypocrite: "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men." In Matt 6:5, he likened those who pray publicly to be seen of men to the hypocrites: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men."

Christians are not to be overly critical of their brothers and sisters. When one judges a brother, he is usurping the authority and right of God to judge his servant. Paul taught in Rom 14:3-4, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." In Rom 14:10-12, he further explained why such judging should not happen:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written:

"As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will confess to God.'"

12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

The Hypocrisy of False Worship and Religious Acts

Those who pervert the teaching of Christ are also hypocrites. In Matt 15:6-9, Jesus applied the word hypocrites to those who are high-minded enough to nullify God's word by their own made-up traditions:

Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 You hypocrites !
Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

8 "These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men."

Jesus criticized the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and called them hypocrites in Matt 23. Their sins of mind and body came from their hypocritical attitude toward the law of God. Their traditions and rules taught by man replaced God's will, to the jeopardy of the people taught. In Matt 23:23-24, the Lord illustrates how religious people can neglect the important matters of God's law:

23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

In Matt 23:25-26, Jesus shows that which is on the inside is what matters. A rule that one should apply to all hypocritical thoughts and acts:

25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

In Matt 23:27-28, the Lord teaches that people who appear to be righteous may be full of hypocrisy and wickedness:

27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites ! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

In our religious worship and acts, we must allow the word of God to direct us and not our own traditions and teachings. This requires Christians to be alert to the teaching of religious teachers, making sure these teachers teach the true word of God. Paul warns us of this danger

in Col 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” All humanly designed religions are hypocritical in concept and application. The ethics and morality of Jesus require that those of the 21st century practice his teachings, just as he delivered them to us in the New Testament.

Conclusion

It is hypocritical for us to pretend that we serve Jesus and turn back to the things of the world, like judging our brethren or following the precepts of men. Jesus concluded his parable of a wicked servant in Matt 24:47-51, placing those who are unfaithful while he is away with the hypocrites:

47 I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48 But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' 49 and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 50 The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. 51 He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Study Questions from the Scriptures

1. John 3: 3-5: What is the new birth?
2. Matt 5:3-8: What are five character traits common to Christians not found in hypocrites?
3. Matt 7:1-5: How will we be judged? What does the speck of sawdust and plank illustration mean? Who is the hypocrite in this example?
4. Matt 6:2: What is one called who advertises his benevolence?
5. Matt 6:5: What are those who pray publicly to be seen of men called?
6. Rom 14:3-4: How is one who judges a servant of God a hypocrite?
7. Matt 15:6-9: What does Jesus call those who are high-minded enough to nullify God’s word by their own made-up traditions? What did Isaiah say about those follow tradition rather than the word of God?
8. Matt 23:23-24: What did the Pharisees do? What did Jesus call them? What does it mean to “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel”?
9. Matt 23:25-26: What does “First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” mean?
10. Matt 23:27-28: What does “dead men’s bones” have to do with hypocrisy?
11. Col 2:8: How are humanly designed religions hypocritical?
12. Matt 24:47-51: What is the place assigned to the hypocrites like?