

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WOE TO YOU ... HYPOCRITES (3)

Matthew 23:13-31

The Lord Jesus denounced the Pharisees more than any other kind of people. We saw in the last two lessons that in Matthew 23, He called them 'hypocrites' six times (verses 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29) and explained various manifestations of that spiritual problem. We saw that it is something perilous, something that will result in spiritual death. Jesus said very plainly that the place of the hypocrites will be in hell. *How shall you escape the sentence of hell*, He said to the Pharisees (Matthew 23:33).

The hypocrisy of Peter

What is hypocrisy? Can we define it in a way that will allow us to clearly grasp the nature of hypocrisy? This is what we will try to do in this lesson.

The Pharisees and the scribes were not the only people who were accused of hypocrisy. In the Scriptures, even good people were said to be hypocrites. Take the example of Peter and Barnabas in Galatians 2:11-13.

Galatians 2:11. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.

*13 And the rest of the Jews joined him in **hypocrisy**, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their **hypocrisy** (hupokrisis).*

When Peter began his ministry in Antioch, he joined right in with the Gentiles, fellowshiping and eating with them. One day, some people from the church in Jerusalem came to Antioch. They were astounded to find Peter fraternizing so freely with Gentiles, even if those Gentiles were Christians. They expressed their chock at Peter's conduct. Peter weakened under their influence and withdrew from close fellowship with the Gentiles. In Galatians 2, Peter's attitude is called hypocrisy. And we read that Barnabas decided to follow Peter's hypocritical example.

Insincerity?

We often think that hypocrisy means insincerity. This is in fact the word that the RSV Bible uses in Galatians 2:13.

*Galatians 2:13. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their **insincerity** (hupokrisis).*

I personally don't think that this is a good translation of the word *hupokrisis*. Peter was not consciously being insincere. This was not the blame against Peter. It was simply that he became at that moment very concerned about the criticism from the Jewish party that had come to Antioch. He feared their reproaches. He feared the report which would be made to the Christians in Jerusalem about him. And therefore he withdrew from the Gentiles. It was not a deliberate attempt to cheat or deceive anyone. And as a result of that weakness, he became inconsistent. It seemed as though he had double standards, one for the Jews, another one for the Gentiles.

The notion of pretense is not there either. Peter was not pretending to act differently than his real self. When Jesus says, 'You are outwardly like white washed tombs and inwardly full of dead men's bones,' it doesn't mean that they were pretending to be like white washed tombs, pretending to be righteous. It is the fact that inwardly, they had died, but outwardly, they still appeared to be alive. We mentioned in the last lesson that the church at Sardis was said to have outwardly the reputation of being alive, but inwardly it was dead. This does not mean that the church of Sardis was pretending to be alive. The fact was that it was once outwardly and inwardly alive. But as time went on, only the outward appearance remained. The inside had died away.

A perversion of conduct

In the other Epistles, the word 'hypocrisy' is often found side by side with lying and slandering. Look at these examples.

*1 Timothy 4:2. ...speaking lies in **hypocrisy**, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron...*

*1 Peter 2:1. Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and **hypocrisy** and envy and **all slander**...*

Lying and slandering are the kind of actions that attempt to cover up sin by putting oneself in a favorable light at the expense of the truth. It is a problem of pervert conduct. And so is the problem of hypocrisy. That is why we find the word 'hypocrisy' in these passages. So it is this perversion of conduct rather than any conscious insincerity which is in view in the definition of hypocrisy.

Moreover, in the Greek OT, the Septuagint, the word 'hypocrite' (*hupokrites*) is used in Job 34:30 and Job 36:13 to describe a person who acts corruptly. Let's read Job 34:30.

*Job 34:30. That the **hypocrite** (hupokrites/chaneph) should not reign, lest the people be ensnared.*

Here we notice that the word 'hypocrite' translates the Hebrew word *chaneph* which means 'defiled, polluted, profaned, corrupt.' A hypocrite is basically a godless person. That is the core notion of hypocrisy. Of the 18 times it is used in the OT, it appears 8 times in Job to show the tragedy of the godless. A godless person, a hypocrite, can never come into the presence of God.

Godlessness

This idea of godlessness is also reflected in the way the Lord Jesus uses the word 'hypocrisy' in parallel passages. Let's take the incident about paying tax to the Roman government. In Mark 12:15, we find the word 'hypocrisy.'

*Mark 12:15. "Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their **hypocrisy**, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it."*

When we compare the parallel verse in Matthew 22:18, we find a different word. We have the word 'wickedness.'

*Matthew 22:18. But Jesus perceived their **wickedness**, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? 19 "Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius.*

And when we compare the word over to Luke 20:23, we see the word 'craftiness.'

*Luke 20:23. But He perceived their **craftiness**, and said to them, "Why do you test Me? 24 "Show Me a denarius. Whose image and inscription does it have?" They answered and said, "Caesar's."*

The attempt of the religious leaders to trap Jesus with their tricky questions is called 'hypocrisy' in Mark, 'wickedness' in Matthew and 'craftiness' in Luke. Hypocrisy, wickedness, craftiness. All these terms refer to a common idea which involves evil intentions. It has to do with wickedness. It has to do with a deceitful spirit. You see again that hypocrisy is not strictly a matter of insincerity or of pretence.

So here we find that 'hypocrisy' is parallel to wickedness in its various forms. Outwardly the person may appear godly, but inwardly he is godless. That is why even in this chapter, in Matthew 23, we notice that the words 'lawlessness' and 'hypocrisy' are put side by side.

*Matthew 23:28. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of **hypocrisy and lawlessness**.*

Four characteristics of hypocrisy

Now there are four other characteristics of the hypocrite that I would like to mention. The word hypocrisy is used by Jesus in Matthew 6:2, 5, 16 to speak about people who do good things (like giving alms, praying, and fasting) in order to impress other people. Notice again that the word hypocrisy is not used to mean insincerity. Here it is a question of carnality. A hypocrite is a person whose mind is carnal. He is more concerned about what other people think of him than about God's opinion of him.

That is what happened to the apostle Peter. He was very concerned about what the Jewish party would think of him when they saw him associating with the Gentiles. At that point in time, his priorities were wrong. He was more preoccupied with what his fellow Christians thought of him than with what God thought of him. And therefore, he acted in this way, in a way that is described as hypocritical. So this is one trait about the hypocrite. He fears men more than he fears God. He is more concerned about people's view of himself than about God's opinion of him.

Another characteristic of the hypocrite is that he is quick to criticize other people and slow to criticize himself. You remember Jesus' words in Matthew 7:5: *You **hypocrite**, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.* This implies that a hypocrite is a person who is very critical of other people, certainly much more than he is of himself. He does not see the sin in his life but he is very good at spotting sin (small or big) in others. And he feels very free to make negative comments about it.

A third characteristic of the hypocrite is that he is scrupulous about man-made rules, but careless about God's commands. This is seen in Matthew 15:7-9: *You **hypocrites**, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. 'But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'*

Jesus blasted the religious leaders by calling them hypocrites. In what way were they hypocrites? Jesus then quoted Isaiah's words (Isaiah 29:13) to explain that they had replaced God's commands with their own man-made teachings. The result is an empty profession of piety because their so-called piety derives from human invention rather than from God's word. Are you living by man-made rules, thinking that they are biblical instructions? Make it a habit of checking every rule to see whether it is actually found in the Bible. You might discover that many are not exactly scriptural and you might enjoy much more freedom in your walk with God.

There is a fourth thing that Jesus said about the hypocrite. Let's read Matthew 24:48-51, a parable about watching for the Lord's return.

*Matthew 24:48. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,'
49 and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken,
50 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know,
51 and will punish him, and put him with the **hypocrites**; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.*

Here we see that the wicked are grouped together with the hypocrites. The wicked servant in v. 48 now joins the hypocrites in v. 51. And what happens to the hypocrites? They will weep and gnash their teeth. They will suffer the pain of hell. In God's plan, the fate of the hypocrites is the same as that of the wicked, i.e. they will go to hell. *The hope of the hypocrite shall perish*, we read in Job 8:13. Once we see that and we believe it, that the hypocrites have no future but to perish, we would do everything possible to stay away from hypocrisy.

A human trait

But you know, to be aware of the dangers of hypocrisy does not prevent a person from becoming a hypocrite. Look at the Pharisees. They were much aware of the dangers of hypocrisy. The Pharisees knew very well that what appears to be of the finest piety can also be accompanied by hypocrisy. A famous passage in the Talmud (Sotah 22b) enumerates in a rather comical way seven classes of Pharisees, of which five consist of hypocrites. For example, there is the 'bruised Pharisee.' This kind of Pharisee keeps bashing his head on the wall, causing his head to bleed. Why does he do that? Because he is afraid to look at a woman. He is afraid that by looking at a woman, he would have lustful thoughts. There is also the 'pestle Pharisee.' This one is so concerned to look humble that when he walks, he is so bent that he looks like the pestle in a mortar.

It is clear that the Jewish rabbis were aware of the problem of hypocrisy in their midst and they condemned it. But it did not prevent them from falling into hypocrisy. 'Woe to you hypocritical Pharisees.' You see, we often have the idea that as long as we know that there is a danger, we would not do it. It is not quite so with hypocrisy. Why? Because hypocrisy is actually human nature at its very basic level. Hypocrisy is simply a human trait. Let me explain.

The word 'hypocrite' is used 17x in the NT. And all those 17x are in the Lord's teaching. We saw several examples in this lesson. When we look at all the verses, we make this observation. We realize that the characteristics of hypocrisy are nothing but the elements of human nature.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that giving for recognition is characteristic of hypocrites. To do certain things in order to impress people, that is human nature, isn't it?

He also said that hypocrites are quick to criticize other people's fault, but very slow to admit his own fault. That is human nature.

Let us be honest. We are all concerned about the external. We are concerned about how other people look at us, whether they have a good opinion of us or not. So we take the time to wash the

outside of the cup. We are not so worried if the inside is dirty because people do not see it anyway. We prefer to take care of the outside because that's what people see. That is human nature.

It is also strange that we are often scrupulous about secondary things, whereas the deep matters in life, we do not give them too much thought. We react strongly over small things, but the most important things in life, we are not too interested. That, again, is human nature.

That is why I say that hypocrisy is part of the human nature. All of us, in our natural state, have a tendency to behave in a hypocritical way. No one is exempt from it. Hypocrisy is simply man in his natural state. It is man with his egocentricity, his selfishness, his superficiality, his materialistic mind-set.

So the problem of hypocrisy is the problem of our human nature. Therefore in order to deal with hypocrisy, we have to deal with our human nature. This is very important to understand. In our next lesson, we will see how to overcome the problem of hypocrisy.