

Why are religious people such hypocrites?

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Date: 08 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Okay, why are religious people such hypocrites? That's a great question, isn't it? And it's a question that is often asked in what people ask when it comes to either Christians or Christianity.

Why are Christians such hypocrites? And you may have heard people ask that before, and there probably is plenty evidence around to ask that question.

So, for example, things like a married minister and also an author has been having multiple affairs with women in his congregation. He's fined out, he's rumbled, and he can't cope, so he commits suicide.

Another respected evangelical church leader is found displaying manipulative and controlling conduct. This included naked spanking, iced baths, and massage sessions.

Another, the Christian founder of a large organization for people with learning difficulties, has been found out to be having sexually, to be abusing, sexually abusing women who are working for his organization.

[1 : 07] And these are real life examples, aren't they? And you may have heard of some of them, but they're recent, and actually some of them are not that far away from where we are. And it's appalling behavior, appalling behavior.

And it does cause people to ask questions about the church. Well, if what you say as a Christian is true, then why do people who profess to be Christians behave in such ways?

There's no way I would ever believe this Christian message that you're telling me about. But of course, hypocrisy doesn't just happen within the church, does it? It happens in all of life.

It happens in sport. It happens in politics. And we know ourselves, we can often be hypocrites too. It just seems to make better stories in the press when Christians are being hypocrites.

Because it shows up an inconsistency between what people claim they believe and how they live. But the reality, of course, is that we are all conscious of how we appear.

[2 : 09] We all want to look good to other people. After all, isn't that what Instagram is all about? Everything is wonderful on Instagram. Everything is horrible on Twitter. But on Instagram, everything is wonderful.

And so, your looks, your life, your loves on Instagram. Your family, your friends, your fitness on Instagram. Your body, your brains, your baking on Instagram.

Your work, your wealth, even your wokeness. It's all displayed on Instagram. Why? Because we want people to look at us and see how good we are. We want to present an image out there to the world that could be very different from how we really are on the inside.

We want to cultivate everything on the outside in such a way that other people think we look good. That we are the kind of person that we want them to think we are.

And yet it can just all be an act that disguises the real you, the real me. And so, yes, religious hypocrisy is a massive problem.

[3 : 16] I've given you some examples. But we can all be hypocrites. And it's this issue of hypocrisy that Jesus tackles head on here in our Bibles in Mark chapter 7.

Jesus calls out the religious leaders of his day for their hypocrisy. And the problem was they were very religious, but yet they were far from God.

And despite all appearances, they were actually rejecting God's commands. Despite looking super spiritual and being very religious, they were rejecting God.

And so what we've got here in Mark chapter 7 is a conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Jesus calls out their hypocrisy to show how their religious traditions were actually a way of rejecting God, of avoiding God altogether.

And so there's an application here for all of us about this issue of hypocrisy, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not. Because this passage essentially is about how we relate to God. [4 : 22] How do you, how do I relate to the God who made us? And it's got nothing to do with our religious behaviour. Nothing to do with our performance.

And yet the danger with religion is that it can mask the true state of our hearts. So I'd like us to look at three things this afternoon. First of all, the trap of tradition.

They're in verse 1 to 7. Second, the supremacy of scripture. They're in verse 8 to 13. And then thirdly, what we must do about it. So the trap of tradition, the supremacy of scripture, and what we must do about it.

Okay, first, the trap of tradition. So there's a conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. And it's over eating food with unwashed hands.

So just look down at verse 1 and 2. The Pharisees and some teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

[5 : 24] So the Pharisees, get this, they were just like the religious police. So they were always looking to see how people behaved. And they could spot bad behaviour, wrong behaviour, a mile off.

So they wanted everybody to keep the rules. And so what they do here is they gather round Jesus and his disciples and basically spy on them to see when they are keeping the rules.

And so they do find an issue. They clashed with Jesus before on other religious issues. But now they come from Jerusalem. And their job is to scrutinise Jesus and his disciples.

And because they were super religious, and because they had a passion for keeping all the man-made traditions, they could easily spot a contravention of rules.

And so what they spot here is that Jesus and his disciples were eating with unwashed hands. And this has got nothing to do with personal hygiene, like you would tell your children to wash their hands before a meal.

[6 : 26] And it's got nothing to do with coronavirus either, where you've got to wash your hands to the tune of, not to the tune, but to the happy birthday, twice over, before you can go near anyone else.

And I actually quite like the coronavirus rules. It just keeps people away. When you don't like people being too close, maybe we'll just implement them for forever, actually.

Anyway, so this hand-washing is not for any other reason than for religious reasons. It's not hygiene, but it's spiritual. And so they were to wash their hands for ritual purity and as a way of saying that they were symbolically clean.

Clean on the inside by washing hands on the outside. And so Mark explains this Jewish practice for the benefit of his readers in verse 3 and 4. So let me read.

The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.

[7 : 29] And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles. So for these religious leaders, cleanliness wasn't next to godliness.

It was actually a form of godliness for them. And so if they came from the marketplace and they'd been in contact with Gentiles, or if Gentiles had handled any of their cups, pitchers, and kettles, then they'd need to wash.

And just to make sure that there was no chance of being defiled, they would just wash everything to make sure that they were spiritually, ritually, symbolically, ceremonially clean.

And it was a way of showing how holy they were by doing these traditions of washing things. And so, because the disciples had ditched the hand-washing ceremony and got stuck into eating the food, then the religious leaders weren't happy with Jesus or with his disciples.

And so this was a warning for them, because it was indicating for them that Jesus' disciples didn't care about holiness, didn't care about being pure. And so their beef is there in verse 5.

[8 : 37] So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating their food with defiled hands?

So what's this tradition of the elders? Well, the tradition of the elders didn't come from the Old Testament part of the Bible, from the Old Testament law. It was a set of rules and regulations that

had somehow, over time, grown up around the Scriptures or around the Bible.

And so the Pharisees and the teachers of the law had basically fallen into this trap of tradition, where these rules and rituals had become more important to them than the Scriptures, which they were pointing to.

So, their traditions, of course, began with the best intentions. They wanted to be pure before God. They wanted to be holy. But their traditions and rules had grown arms and legs, and they weren't from God.

Now, ceremonial washing was a requirement in the law of Moses, but only for the priests. So the priests, before they conducted worship for the people, would have to be clean.

[9 : 47] But, by the time of Jesus' day, that rule meant that the Pharisees were saying, everybody has to be clean, everybody has to be washed. So this command of God in Scripture had grown arms and legs and become a man-made tradition.

And there's a difference, isn't there, between a command that comes from God and a man-made tradition or a man-made rule. But for the Pharisees, this man-made tradition, this rule, had become more important to them than the teaching of the Scriptures, than the law of God in the Scriptures. And so the accusation wasn't that the disciples were breaking God's commands, because the disciples weren't breaking God's commands. The accusation is that they were breaking the traditions of the elders.

They were breaking the man-made and human rules that had grown up around the Bible. And that's why Jesus gives such a stinging rebuke to the religious leaders.

There in verse 6 and 7, he replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written, these people honour me with their lips, for their hearts are far from me.

[10 : 58] They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules. Now, Jesus doesn't mince these words here. He quotes from Isaiah to call them hypocrites.

And the context of this is Isaiah chapter 29, where God announces his judgment on Israel's blind and deaf leaders. So they professed to worship God, but their worship was empty.

And so Jesus says the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are just the same. They're hypocrites. Now, the word hypocrite originated with the Greeks. So the hypocrite was an actor in a play who performed wearing a mask, pretending to be somebody else.

That was the hypocrite. And that's just what the religious leaders were doing. They put on a good show in public. They look good to everybody else. Super spiritual. Super holy. Washing hands. Washing plates and cups and kettles. So they're giving the impression that they're devoted to God, but Jesus is saying their hearts are far away from God.

[12 : 02] So they put their human traditions above God's commands in the scriptures. And so just before we move on, I guess we need to see how this applies to us.

Because anybody can give the appearance of honouring God with their lips, but having a heart that is far away from him. And that's the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus calls out here.

So Christian leaders and Christian people can put on a good show, even a good evangelical show, of religiosity by doing all the right things and obeying all the right traditions.

But that can swamp heart obedience to God. So it's easy to pay lip service to God. It's easy to sing all the songs to God.

It's easy to attend the right church. It's easy to show up at the right meetings. It's easy to drop big theological words into conversation. It's easy to have the right chat in Christian circles.

[13 : 05] It's easy to give off some kind of spiritual vibe to other people. It's easy to be part of the right tribe, even to be part of the right church planting network. You can have all of these things and yet still have a sinful heart that isn't right with God.

We get that, don't we? It's easy to be a hypocrite. Which just makes all of the outward performance, all of the religiosity, all of the spiritual persona that we present, it just makes it all a sham.

It's a waste of time. It's a complete and utter joke. It's a big pretense because it isn't flowing from a heart that worships God. So often it can be flowing from a heart that just wants other people to think that we're good.

And that's why Jesus is so angry with the Pharisees because they were deluding themselves and they were probably, to some extent, deluding other people. But for sure, Jesus makes it clear, guys, you're not deluding God here.

God can see your heart. He knows what you're really like. No matter what show you put on, he sees you as you are. So Jesus is saying that our worship is in vain if it's all about what we do on the outside as opposed to what we're like on the inside.

[14 : 26] It's not about human traditions. It's not about spiritual performance. It's about our hearts. And so no matter how super spiritual we appear, no matter how we might excel in terms of our religiosity, we can still be a hypocrite if our worship doesn't come from a heart that loves God.

So let me just try and illustrate. Think of a marriage relationship. A marriage should be an intimate, loving relationship between a husband and a wife. So just imagine a husband who decides that he'll perform certain duties in the marriage relationship.

So he will buy flowers every day. He'll clean the house every day. He'll cook meals every day. He'll do the washing of the dishes every day. And so on and so on and so on.

Sounds good, doesn't it? Sounds fantastic. Well, what if he does all these good things and he feels good about doing all these good things and yet despite all of these things, he still doesn't really engage with his wife in any kind of real depth.

So practically, he's doing a good bunch of stuff, but emotionally, there's a distance between him and his wife. So he doesn't spend much time with his wife. He doesn't show her any real interest at all.

[15 : 44] Then we'd hardly call it a healthy marriage, would we? So you might interview the wife and say, hey, marriage seems to be going well. Look at all the stuff that he does.

And she might say, well, yeah, he does all this stuff and it is all good stuff that he's doing, but he doesn't spend any time with me.

He doesn't love me. He doesn't care for me. He's never really wanting to talk to me. And so it all might look good, but it isn't really a healthy marriage.

And so can you see what Jesus is saying here? Christianity is not about religious performance. It is about a relationship with God, where we worship God.

And so we need to be aware of the trap of tradition, don't we? Because we can fall into the trap of tradition but still have a heart that is far away from God.

[16 : 40] That's the first point, the trap of tradition. Second point is the supremacy of scripture. That's there in verse 8 to 13. Jesus responds to these religious leaders by saying that the scriptures are supreme.

So what God says takes precedence over human traditions. And he repeats this three times. Just look at verse 8. You've let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. Then verse 9. You're a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions. And again verse 13. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.

So when Jesus is speaking about the commands of God or the word of God, he's referring to the Hebrew scriptures to what we have as the Old Testament, which would be the Bible of their day. And the problem is that these leaders had put their trust in the traditions of men over and above the word of God.

[17 : 43] The traditions of men had become more important than God's word. And so Jesus is saying you've actually ignored what God says because you're so obsessed with your own traditions.

And Jesus gives an example to make this point. Verse 10. For Moses said, honour your father and mother and anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is korban, that is, devoted to God, then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.

So one of their traditions had led to the rejection of God's commandment, which was to honour your father and mother. Mark says korban means a gift devoted to God.

So a person would dedicate their gift to God. But this tradition of korban resulted in people avoiding the responsibility to their parents and so therefore disobeying God's command.

So for example, a son could say, I've offered up this property to God so it's korban. In other words, the property can't be touched or used for anything else because it's been offered to God.

[18 : 57] But then, what if the son's parents get ill or into trouble, maybe even lose their home and so they desperately need the help of their son. But this man-made rule meant that he couldn't give them help.

It meant that nothing could be done for them. So you'd have to say, I'm sorry mum, I'm sorry dad, I'd really love to help but I can't because whatever help you might have received from me is korban. I've already signed all this off to God so I can't help you in any way. and so this man-made tradition contradicted and was in opposition to the spirit of the commandment of God which was to honour your father and mother.

And so Jesus said, verse 13, thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you've handed down and you do many things like that. So Jesus uses one example to show how their traditions make void the word of God.

and Jesus by what he says could have given many more examples of their hypocrisy. So the religious leaders were driving people away from God because their traditions were more precious and important to them than God's word.

[20 : 12] And so human traditions do have the potential to be really, really dangerous. They can be downright evil if they delude people into thinking that they're pleasing God when they're actually disobeying him.

And so Jesus doesn't care about our traditions. And when people do start to care about human traditions, that's when they've become far more important than they should be.

And you still see this today. And I guess it happens in churches all the time. At best, it's when traditions are subtly given a greater authority than the Bible.

and at worst, it's when traditions actually displace the Bible and people don't even realise. So what happens is that the Bible becomes domesticated as human traditions are elevated.

And so if we are part of a church, if we belong to Christ Church Glasgow, for example, we need to be aware of human traditions distracting us from the word of God, from obeying the word of God.

[21 : 18] And I think you can always tell when traditions become more important than the Bible for people. You discover it when an attempt is made to change a tradition or even to drop the tradition altogether.

That's when people start to panic because they think they can't possibly stop or change or drop it. And yet traditions that are man-made can be the sort of thing that result in division, in argument, in fallout, or even in churches splitting altogether.

And when it happens, it's clear that the human tradition has been held far too tightly. And normally, the word of God has been held far too loosely because silly, self-serving traditions can easily trump the substance of God's word.

And so whether it's verbalised or not, the implication is there is a greater authority that we must adhere to, not the Bible, but the traditions that we have set up. And so it's easy to see when Scripture is no longer the supreme authority in a church.

It's when people care more about their traditions than they do about upholding the Bible or obeying what the Bible says about gossip or human sexuality or lies or manipulation or any other kind of sinful behaviour.

[22 : 43] when that is just downplayed and tradition is overplayed then it's a problem, isn't it? When following traditions becomes more important than following God's word then we're guilty of being hypocrites.

Because following a tradition or doing something in a certain way might seem like a badge of spirituality just like it was for the Pharisees and the teachers of the law but all it is is just a way of us looking better than other people as if we're more acceptable to God because of our religious performance and yet this misses the point of what Jesus is saying here and it misses the heart of Christianity.

In fact religion you could say is the enemy of Christianity because in religion people look to their moral performance they look to their good works they look to their religious observance as their saviour.

They look to themselves and what they do as their method of salvation. And so here's what we must do about it. So first point the trap of tradition second point the supremacy of scripture third point what we must do about it.

So the religious teachers they're trying to earn their acceptance before God by keeping man-made traditions. Basically they were trying to be their own saviour.

[24 : 03] But Jesus calls out their hypocrisy because their attempts at self-salvation are never going to work. And so what will work? Well traditions aside the commands of God still need to be obeyed.

If they're commands from God then God expects his people to do them. And so that's what we must do if we are to be accepted by God is obey God's commands.

And yet the problem is we can't do it. so just take the command to honour your father and mother which Jesus mentions here. Who of us has obeyed that command all the time?

My mum was staying with us this weekend and I broke that command already. So we don't do it.

And just think worshipping God. Worshipping God 100% for all of your life.

Who of us has obeyed that command? None of us has managed to do it. The obligation is impossible to meet. We can't do it no matter how hard we try.

[25 : 11] We'll never be good enough for God. Even our very best efforts just show up our hypocrisy. Show up how far we fall short and fail.

And that's why we need to admit that we are a sinner who has failed to obey God and worship God as we should. That's why we need to admit that we are seriously flawed people who are far from God.

And yet the fantastic news of Christianity is that despite this awful predicament there is still hope for us. We can still have a relationship with God.

And that relationship comes by sheer grace. So our own efforts are too feeble and too falsely motivated to ever earn our own salvation.

But Jesus has come to do for us that we can never do for ourselves. Jesus lived a life that we could never live, a life in full obedience to God's commands, and Jesus died the death that we deserve to die, a death for our disobedience to God's commands.

[26 : 18] And so Jesus, through his death and through his resurrection, has provided salvation for us, which is a free gift. faith. And so we're made right with God, not through what we do, but through what Jesus Christ has done for us.

And so it's faith alone, through the work of Jesus Christ alone, that puts us right with God. And when we're united with God, through faith in Jesus Christ, that's when we are considered righteous in God's sight.

We're considered holy and pure, clothed with righteousness, not our own, but because Jesus puts that righteousness on us.

And so religion makes moral obedience, and it makes religious performance the way to be accepted by God. Whereas the gospel of Jesus Christ says you can never be saved through your performance or through your obedience, but only through the performance and the obedience. of Jesus. So religion says I obey, therefore I'm accepted, whereas the gospel of Jesus Christ says I'm accepted by God, therefore I obey.

[27 : 36] So Christianity gives us a new identity that's defined by what Jesus has done for us, not what we do ourselves. And when you get this identity, when you discover it doesn't actually matter what people think of you, who cares what anyone else thinks because I'm not a performing monkey for other people.

I ought to care about what God thinks of me. And because he's given to me this new identity in Jesus, and I'm his, I belong to him, I'm accepted, and I'm loved, and I don't need to do anything to prove myself to him.

him. And so if God accepts us by sheer grace, then we try to live as we ought. Out of a heart full of gratitude, our obedience will always be a delight, it will never be a duty, because we'll want to obey God's commands out of a love for him and a desire to please him.

So Christians, no matter what you think of Christians, if you're here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you think Christians are such a bunch of hypocrites, Christians are nothing more than sinners saved by grace.

And they're saved not because of themselves or anything better in them, that they're smarter or more clever, or because of their performance, they're saved by Christ's performance, what Jesus has done.

[29 : 04] And so we will always fail to live as we should, and we will continually, as Christians, need forgiveness and we'll need grace. And that's why Christians and the church will always be accused of hypocrisy.

The church is filled with immature and broken and sinful people who have still got a long, long, long way to go. So we're all hypocrites.

So let's just acknowledge we're all hypocrites. There's no point in trying to hide it, because we've got nothing to prove to God or to anyone else.
and because we've got nothing to prove, we should acknowledge our sin, we should acknowledge our failure, we should acknowledge we don't worship God with our hearts as we should, and we should go to him and find forgiveness and find grace from Jesus Christ.
Because anyone who goes to him, who humbles himself and acknowledges their need, he will never, ever turn away. And that's good news.