

THE FALSE FRONT - HYPOCRISY

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Seldom did Jesus condemn anything more severely than he condemned hypocrisy. The word hypocrisy is a word from which we all turn in horror. Nothing would hurt us more deeply than for some close friend to say, "You are a hypocrite." We pass no more severe judgment on others than to think from time to time, "He is a hypocrite." The word hypocrisy means: "the playing of a part, as on the stage; the act or practice of feigning to be what one is not, or to feel what one does not feel; especially the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or of religion; simulation of goodness." A hypocrite is "a false pretender to virtue or to piety."

Hypocrisy is akin to dishonesty, to the lack of integrity, and to deceit. Lying certainly is a close blood brother to hypocrisy. There is no better way to express the idea of hypocrisy than to refer to it as the false front. It can even be revealed in the kind of clothing that we wear, the kind of car that we drive, the kind of house that we live in. Our whole way of life may at one point or another impinge upon the sin of hypocrisy, or deceit.

A number of years ago we lived in southern California. Occasionally, we would be in an area where the movie industry had been at work. I remember particularly a beautiful little lake in the mountains around which the studio carpenters had created an appealing little village. There were realistic cabins, stores, and even a jail. But the part of the experience which stands out most vividly in my mind is the shock I felt when I discovered that each of these little buildings was only a front--only a sham. Unfortunately people, too, are sometimes largely false fronts.

Jesus condemned very few things more severely than he condemned hypocrisy. It is of interest to note that this word hypocrisy, in one of its forms, appears in the Bible only twenty-two times. The condemnation of deceit, a false front, and lying is certainly found throughout the Old Testament as well as through the New, but the word hypocrisy appears only in the New Testament. Of the twenty-two times it appears, nineteen are from the lips of our Lord. Let us read a few of these passages.

Hypocrisy in Worship

In Matthew 6 there are several verses which give the impact of his condemnation of false religion: "Take heed that you do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father which is in heaven. When therefore thou doest alms, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward....And when ye pray ye shall not be as the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward....Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may be seen of men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have received their reward." (Matt. 6:1-2,5,16.) In each of these instances it is a false front. It is a man who, while not generous or prayerful or deeply religious in his heart, wants to appear so before men. The heart and the outward act are not in accordance one with the other.

In Matthew 7 we read, "Judge not, that ye be not judged," and then a moment later, "Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?...Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam that is in thine own eye; and then thou shalt see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." (Matt. 7:1,3,5.) The one who finds faults with others while condoning his own faults is hereby branded a hypocrite.

Turn a few pages further and you find in the fifteenth chapter of Matthew this sentence: "Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me." (Matt. 15:7-8.) The heart going in one direction and the lips going in another constitute the false front--hypocrisy. An example between this divergence of heart and lips is found in a paragraph in Matthew 22: "Then went the Pharisees and took counsel how they might ensnare him in his talk. And they send to him their disciples, with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, and carest not for anyone: (They no more believe that than anything.) for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" They came to ask a captious question, but they began by saying sweet, complimentary things about how much confidence they had in his teaching of the truth. Jesus' answer cuts through all their hypocrisy, "But Jesus perceived their wickedness and said, Why make ye trial of me, ye hypocrites?" (Matt. 22:15-17, 19.)

Scathing Condemnation

The greatest condemnation of hypocrisy in all of the New Testament is found in Matthew 23: "Then spake Jesus to the multitudes, and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: all things therefore whatsoever they bid you, these things do and observe; but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not." (Matt. 23:1-3.) That is the false front; "They say and do not." Then, later in the chapter, "But woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter....Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he has become so, ye make him twofold more son of hell than yourselves....Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy and faith." Outwardly they were fastidiously correct, but inwardly they had missed the main things of religion--justice and mercy and faith. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess--Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like whited sepulchers, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (Matt. 23:13, 15, 23,27.)

Only Three Times

Only three times in the New Testament does the word hypocrite, or hypocrisy, occur outside of the speaking of Christ. One of those times is in the letter that Paul wrote to the Romans. "Let love be without hypocrisy." (Rom. 12:9.) Nothing is more reprehensible than the idea of hypocritical love. Feigned love between husband and wife is a sorry substitute for what God intended. Even more reprehensible if the performing of acts presumably in adoration and love of God yet without really loving God. A man whose main concern is the saving of his own soul so that he might not perish in hell has not yet come to the center of Christianity which is the adoring love of God. We need to grow from selfish concern for our own welfare into the free, complete love of the God who made us, lest there be in us a trace of hypocrisy.

The False Front--Hypocrisy

One of the other passages in which we find the word hypocrisy is in Paul's first letter to Timothy: "The Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God created to be received with thanksgiving." (I Tim. 4:1-3.) That is strong language. The last of the twenty-two times that the word hypocrisy appears in the New Testament is in the book of James: "The wisdom that is from above (God's wisdom, God's way) is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without variance, without hypocrisy." (James 3:17.) The wisdom of God has no trace of the false front--no trace of hypocrisy.

False Fronts Are Common

Hypocrisy is very widespread and the temptation to be a hypocrite is quite common. We see it even in youngsters going to school. Sometimes we speak of "apple polishing," which is simply a child's way of wanting to appear more worthy before a teacher than his merits deserve. We have seen term papers which had a few extra pages of padding in them, that they might appear longer to the teacher. We have known a few students who regularly nodded their heads in agreement when the teacher's eyes happened to come in their direction. These are tiny indications of the false front.

We see the false front sometimes in courtship. A boy wants to appear more worthy in the eyes of the girl that he is courting than he really is, so he is an actor. She similarly may be an actress. After a while when they are married each finds out that the other is something less than he appeared to be. This is why brief courtships are dangerous. Those of us who perform wedding ceremonies sometimes are confronted with problems. I, like other gospel preachers, have a conviction against performing ceremonies for those who have been married and divorced without the scriptural reason. Yet, I have come to learn the hard way, that a man who has left a wife and broken a home does not mind deceiving a preacher in order to marry the next wife. One man explained that his wife left him, an innocent, broken-hearted husband. He claimed to have scriptural right to remarry, but I later learned that he was the philanderer. This is hypocrisy of a striking, painful kind. Sometimes a man who is not very religious seems very religious during the period of courtship. He attends the church services with his prospective bride, but after the wedding he fails to come.

Hypocrisy comes close home to many of us when we move into the realm of business. We do not wish to be too severe, but much of the advertising that we hear is an overstatement of the case. The temptation is very great to claim that the product is better than it is. This means more sales, more profits. Or, a salesman is very interested in his client's family and welfare, until the order is signed. As he then drives on his way his interest in the family of his client somehow suddenly wanes. We are not speaking about those who are genuinely interested in people and genuinely interested in the welfare of their customers, but particularly of the high pressure kind of salesman. The repairman, who advertises that he is an honest man, and that he will deliver an honest job, but ends by bleeding the public, is a hypocrite. It is easy to speak of hypocrisy in general terms, but we must come home to ourselves and examine our own lives. Hypocrisy is appearing to be what we are not.

The temptation to be a hypocrite is a very strong one in religion. A man can appear to be very religious by coming to certain places and going through certain acts, but he is a hypocrite if he does not carry his religion into everyday living and into all the contacts of his life. Ananias and Sapharra were outwardly very fine Christians, but down deep in their hearts they were hypocrites.

The Better Way

In the long run hypocrisy does not pay. Hypocrisy grows out of man's desire to win the approval of other people. It may be for monetary reasons, or for other reasons, but basically it is man's desire to appear in the eyes of others better than he really is. He erects a false front in order that others may think more highly of him than he really deserves to be thought of. After a time it wears thin. If he wants to have the good will, the respect and the honor of other people, the long way is the better way. Let him build a character in which there is nothing to hide. A life that has nothing that needs to be covered or hidden is the only permanent way to win the respect of respectable people.

Daniel's was such a life. You remember that his enemies sought some grounds on which they could embarrass him. After searching his past they made the admission, "We shall find no occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God." (Dan. 6:5.) In the long run the only way to really win the approval of people who count is by being a deep, sincere, and earnest Christian. There must be no gap between what we claim to be and what we are. As we think of this and apply it to our lives, it may be that we need to make some changes down underneath in order that on the outside we may sincerely appear as we ought to appear.

Too many people are like chamellions--the little lizzard that has the unusual quality of changing the color of its skin according to its mood and according to its environment. This is all right for chamellions, but it is not very good for people. A man's convictions ought not to depend on who he is talking to or where he finds himself. His behavior must not change as he goes from one group to another. That is hypocrisy.

So that the Cause of Christ may not suffer, may we dedicate ourselves to eliminate whatever insincerity or hypocrisy there may be in our lives. There must be no divergence between what we are inside and what we profess to be. Then may each of us help the other that our love may be without hypocrisy and that our Christianity be real Christianity.
