

Proper 16 C
St. Luke 13:10-17
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St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Legalistic Christianity

"Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites!"

Hypocrites! There is plenty of that to go around. I must confess that I have fallen prey to hypocrisy. I have said one thing and done another, the complete opposite of what I should have done. When we live out hypocrisies, we undermine our credibility and authenticity. People can no longer trust the veracity of the words which come forth from our mouths, and, sadly, even when those words are the truth, other people don't know what to make of our words anymore.

The sad part about hypocrisy is that we are often unaware of it when we blithely commit it, unless someone calls us on it. We give little thought to the words and core values we have learned and try to represent in our lives sometimes, even most of the time, and then we are tempted to forget them and get caught up in what *we* want to do in the moment. And what we may be tempted to do, what we *want* to do, is in conflict with who we are supposed to be.

At its core, hypocrisy is a *betrayal*. We betray who we are

supposed to be, who we say we are, by showing that other things take precedent over what is really good for us and what is right for us to do. We betray what we have embraced as our core principles. We betray our promises and vows to God, and to others around us. Sometimes it requires great self-discipline to stay on track. It is so easy to rationalize doing something which is not only sinful, but is also downright bad for us.

At the dark heart of Hypocrisy, it is all about lying and hypocrisy is the embodiment of a complete lie. We lie to ourselves and believe our own lies, rationalizing them along the way. We have lied that we embrace a set of values. We *pretend* to be God's friend and we make a show of obeying God publicly, but in our hearts we know that we are the worst kind of friend, because our hypocrisy leads us to be betrayers. What kind of friend does that? Our words begin to have no meaning. How can God take our promises and vows seriously, when we continuously break them and do otherwise than God wishes us to do?

To avoid hypocrisy, you have to have those core values emblazoned in your mind and in your heart. Some of the Jews kept the law literally close to their minds by wearing a small leather box with little vellum scrolls inside containing the law hanging over or above their foreheads. These were called phylacteries and were a clear reminder to devout Jewish men to obey the law. Surely, the leader of the synagogue would have been wearing one of these when Jesus came to visit. It might be a helpful reminder of God's law, but unless that law is written in your heart and mind, the effort is ultimately futile. Matthew says it well in his Gospel: [Matthew 12:34] *"You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the **heart** the mouth speaks."*

Indeed, Paul describes those who are faithful and not hypocrites in this way: [in Romans 2:15] *“They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.”*

Finally, God is clear that the law will not only be in our minds, but written in our hearts, when God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah: [Jeremiah 31:33] *“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”* This was written way back in the time of the First Covenant. It is clear to me that Jesus came to write these laws in our minds and hearts.

Hypocrisy is a very human failing. It is a shortcoming which we continually must work to root out of our lives and actions. We must be true to the simple law of God: *love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.*

But Jesus is not a hypocrite. *He* called the religious leaders and members of the synagogue hypocrites. Their hypocrisy amidst supposed piety and devotion was disturbing, because their legalism obscured the deeper truth that helping out another person is never against the law of God: it *is* always *the* law of God!

There are always many encounters for all of us with those who want to tell you they know best about how you should live and run your life. They go about with a fist full of rules which they can recite to cover any situation you want. They are very sure they are right and that you are wrong. Therein lies the opening for hypocrisy to flourish.

What is deeply troubling is when people who believe they are very religious or devout, begin to behave this way. Some would call us *religious* people and insist that they are people of *real faith*, as if we are not, or lack the substance of the faith which they possess. Just like the authorities, the leaders of the synagogue in the Biblical passage this morning, and the oft cited Pharisees and Sadducees of Gospel fame, are teaching one thing, but are blind to the fact their actions are contrary to what they teach others and suppose they model for others. Do not seek to be a model of devoutness that others aspire to. Rather seek to always be faithful out of love to God, and don't worry what others think of you.

Another part of this worldview is that everything is in black and white. There is no grey. There is no compromise. There is no room for conversation. There is no mixing of solutions. The worldview is fixed. It is unshakable, and what's more, these are "God's fixed rules," unchangeable immutable, and by this you shall live. If you fall short of their rules and ways, you are in big trouble, and there is no hope for you. It is *their way or the highway!*

I have always found this point of view off-putting and frankly, very distressing. This is not my experience of God, limited though my experience is. It is not my experience of the core teachings of the Bible, either the First or the Second Covenants described in the scriptures which record them. It is not my experience of Jesus.

Jesus wants you and me to be authentic Christians, not merely in outward signs and words, but in the inner person. God wants us to be transformed in heart and mind, and it is there God desires us to be faithful in obedience to God's laws. God wants us to always do the most loving thing, no matter the cost. No greater love has a human being than this, that they

lay down their lives for their friends. You are God's friends if you follow God's commandments.

It doesn't matter what you look like or say outwardly. It really doesn't matter what others think of you: you can never control that anyway. It is always about the authenticity of what's on the inside of you that really matters, and surely God knows what is in our hearts! AMEN