

How to Tell if You're a Hypocrite

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[0:00] In January of 2012, off the coast of Italy, a cruise ship called the Costa Concordia was sailing.

! You may have heard of this ship. And as it was sailing along too close, it turns out, to an island, it hit an underwater rock. Thousands of people, passengers and crew, were on board.

In the middle of the night, it hit this rock. Actually, it was not the middle of the night. It was kind of around dinner time. And it hit the rock below the waterline of the ship and made this huge gash underneath the waterline.

And water started gushing in, into the compartments deep below in this ship. And it started slowly to sink. The impact of this rock was felt by all the passengers.

They were quite alarmed. Some of them were dozing off in there. Were startled. And they immediately panicked, put on their life jackets as they were told to do when they first boarded the ship.

[1:05] And they headed for the muster stations to board the lifeboats. But the captain was not aware of the extent of the damage of his ship.

And he didn't think it was that serious. Because it looked fine up above. On top, it looked all fine. So he actually ordered the passengers to go back to their cabins.

And he ordered his dinner crew to continue dinner service. All while the ship was slowly sinking beneath them. He didn't realize the true danger that they were in.

Sadly, the same thing can be said of the spiritual lives of many people who call themselves Christians today.

People will sit in church. And they will convince themselves that spiritually everything is okay.

Because it's all fine on the surface. They're at church. They're doing Christian things.

[2:09] While the whole time, they are still heading for hell. And in this passage that we're reading in front of us today, Jesus issues a very serious warning to people who are religious just on the surface.

He has a special word that is only found on Jesus' lips in the Bible. The word hypocrite. You would have heard him. He said it seven times in this passage. Hypocrite.

But that word in the original Greek is simply the word for actor. It's the same word they would have used for actors on the stage in their plays. He uses the word for actor.

People who pretend to be someone they're not. And what he's saying here is that many people are acting a devotion to God that is not real.

Back then, but it is no different today. In any given church gathering, like this one, they are bound to be some hypocrites.

[3:18] Some actors. People just going through the motions. I can't tell who they are. But even worse, they themselves might not realize it.

And that's why we need this passage, this serious passage, this warning passage. We need to hear what Jesus says because as we'll see in this passage, he explains not only why hypocrisy is so dangerous to our souls, but how we can spot it before it's too late.

And so let's look firstly at the danger of hypocrisy. Jesus is addressing the religious leaders of his day called the Pharisees. They were, if you had seen them then, they were very impressive, very religiously impressive.

They did the right things. They kept God's law very stringently. They wore the right clothes. If you wanted to look at really pious religious people, you would look at the Pharisees.

They were very religiously impressive. But as we discovered last week, as Jesus taught us, it was really all just a show. They were just showing off. And because of that, he has these words for them

from verse 13.

[4:29] He says, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you actors. You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.

You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Okay, so their hypocrisy, Jesus is saying here, their acting, their surface only religion is dangerous.

It's dangerous. It's deeply dangerous. Not only because it actually shuts them out of heaven when they think they're going there, but even worse, it shuts others out too who they teach to do the same as them.

He goes on in verse 15. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You travel over land and sea to win a single convert.

And when you've succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Now notice here, it's not that these people are not devoted to their religion.

[5:36] They're very devoted and they make very devoted followers as well. They'll travel over land and sea to make devoted followers. And they're very devoted and they're fervent about their religion.

But despite all their fervor and despite all their devotion on the surface, Jesus says, they're still going to hell. You see, according to Jesus, you can be very religious.

You can be very devoted to your religion and still go to hell. And that is a sobering thought. You can come to church every Sunday.

You can sing songs. You can raise your hands. You can be on the roster. You can be in service.

You can be doing ministry. You can be teaching God's Word and still be headed for hell.

And that is why hypocrisy is such a dangerous spiritual state. If you think about it, it's even more dangerous than not being a Christian. Because at least if you're not a Christian, you can know that you're not in right relationship with God.

[6:49] A hypocrite thinks they are. They think they're safe. That's why it's so dangerous. This cruise ship, the Costa Concordia, people died in 2012 because of that disaster.

But they only died because for so long, it looked like that ship was not sinking. They thought they were fine. The captain thought it was fine.

And that's why it was fatal for people. And that's the danger of hypocrisy as well. You see, hypocrites think they're fine because they're doing all the right things. They don't realize that they're headed for hell.

And the shocking thing, and I think the thing we need to take on board here, is that you could be in that position. I could be in that position that Jesus is warning of here.

So how do we know? How can I know if I'm a hypocrite? Well, that's what we go on to discover in this passage. Jesus goes on to tell us what hypocrisy actually looks like.

[7:58] How to spot it. And there are some key indicators that he gives that show hypocrisy coming out. There's four that I want to point out from these woes that he issues, these warning signs of hypocrisy.

The first is that hypocrites love to find loopholes in obeying God. Hypocrites love to find loopholes. Look from verse 16. Jesus says, Woe to you blind guides!

You say, If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing. But anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath. You blind fools! Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred?

Okay, what? What's going on here? Jesus is talking about a very common practice in the ancient world, in ancient Israel, which is to give oaths to people.

And people would bind, like our contracts today, they would bind themselves to certain oaths. And for society to work properly and for relationships and business to run properly, people needed to be true to their oaths.

[9:07] There was actually laws in the Old Testament, you can look them up, where God tells people how they are to make sure they keep the oaths that they make. And it was essential.

You see, we've got contracts today. We don't use oaths like they use. We've got written contracts, lease agreements, employment contracts. Now imagine we didn't have any contracts. Things would fall apart. There would be no sort of commitment to do things and no holding people accountable.

They didn't have contracts like we have. They had oaths. And that's essentially how they functioned. And were essential for society and for business to work. But the Pharisees had come up

with a special way to make certain oaths non-binding.

So you could make an oath, but know that you're not going to keep it, but pretend like you were.

You could essentially make an oath with your fingers crossed behind your back.

And you would make these non-binding oaths by swearing by certain things that the Pharisees declared, if you swore by that thing, it's non-binding.

[10:14] Which means you didn't have to actually honor the oath you made, certain oaths, even though that was against God's law. Even though in the Old Testament, God wants you to keep your oaths. Jesus spoke about it actually in the Sermon on the Mount as well.

It was that important in those days. But the Pharisees had made away a loophole. That you could get around having to pay what you promised. Or having to keep your oath.

But still be seen to be keeping the law. So it was essentially a way to keep the law while ignoring what God really wanted. It was a way for people to look law-abiding and religious, but still be rebels against what God really wanted.

To still live their way and do their thing that they wanted to do rather than what God wanted them to do. That is the first sign of a hypocrite. And it's the same today.

If you think about it, people will often make clever ways to do what they want rather than what God wants, but technically while not sinning.

[11:17] You'll often find people who will skirt the edge. It's not technically a sin to do this, but it's actually, if you look at it, it's actually against what God wants.

You know, if I fool around with my girlfriend in this particular way, we're not technically having sex, so it's fine. Or if I hold back the truth with these particular words, I'm not technically lying, so it's okay.

This kind of talk, you often hear it. Well, I'm not technically sinning, but you know what that is?

That's just looking for loopholes. And that's the first sign of a hypocrite.

When we look for loopholes in obeying God, it exposes hypocrisy. The second sign is hypocrites major on minors.

They major on minors. They make small things into big things so that they can ignore the big things that God actually wants them to do. Jesus says this in verse 23 to verse 24.

[12:18] Have a look in your Bibles. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill, and cumin, 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. You blind guides. You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel. Now that would have been actually a play on words in the original Aramaic because the word for gnat and the word for camel sounded very similar, but it was a funny image that Jesus paints here of a Jewish religious person.

So gnat, by the way, gnat, it's a little insect, those tiny little insects that fly around that irritate you when you're trying to watch TV or something. And then a camel, both a gnat and a camel were unclean animals according to Leviticus.

And so they weren't allowed to eat them. And so if they saw a gnat in their soup or something, they would make sure that they took it out very carefully. But Jesus paints this picture of them carefully taking out this gnat, straining out this gnat while chomping the leg of a camel while they're doing it, which is pointless.

And he uses that picture to paint what a hypocrite looks like. A hypocrite is very careful to keep certain rules very stringently often.

[13:44] Here he uses the example of tithing. They tithed, so they had to tithe, they had to give, be generous. They went and tithed the smallest herbs in their garden, find the smallest herbs and they cut 10% of those herbs so that they could tithe those while completely ignoring the big things God actually wants them to be and do in society justice, mercy, fairness.

They were ignoring those big things but they were thinking they were okay because they were tithing their cumin. Right? But that's what a hypocrite does. They do the small things but ignore the bigger things that God wants.

But it's the same in our age, isn't it? We've seen in our own history in this country a perfect example of that. White Christians, during apartheid, many of them turning a blind eye to injustice but they stayed away from rock and roll and they didn't touch alcohol.

You know, this stringent law keeping on one hand but totally ignoring the injustice that's happening around them on the other hand. I grew up on the tail end of apartheid, the 80s and 90s.

I remember He-Man was evil. Don't touch He-Man. Star Wars was evil. That messed me up for a while. But, of course, treating black people as less valuable, that was fine.

[15:18] Hypocrisy. That's what hypocrites do. They focus on the rules, making sure they keep the rules while they're completely ignoring what God actually wants. thirdly, hypocrites put on a religious outfit over their true selves from verse 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. Blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and dish and then the outside also will be clean.

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 the bones of the dead and everything unclean.

In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Now Jesus talks about these whitewashed tombs.

Probably from where he was in the temple precinct if they had looked over down into the Mount of Olives which they would have had a view of, they would have seen a whole lot of these tombs.

[16:40] Whitewashed tombs. You can actually go there today and still there is this huge graveyard in the Mount of Olives with these very bright whitewashed tombs and they did it once a year just before Passover and Jesus is teaching here just before Passover and so they would have probably as he is talking about these looked out and seen all of these beautifully white stark tombs and the reason they did this interestingly was because tombs were unclean to the Jew because they had dead people inside.

So you stayed away, you made sure you didn't touch them and lots of people are moving around or walking around there during Passover and so they made these very obvious so that you would stay away from them but they provided for Jesus a great example of what a hypocrite is because of the contrast of how clean and white it is on the outside versus what you know is inside rotting corpses and that is a perfect picture Jesus says of hypocrisy.

On the outside they are clean. A hypocrite does the right things. they go to church. They look clean. They look righteous.

They are ticking all the boxes. Going to church maybe because it is their culture. They are culturally Christian. That is what they do in their culture. Or you grew up going to church and so you just carry on going to church and make sure you do all the right things.

That is on the outside. But on the inside what is going on where no one sees. When they get home from church then their faith is dead.

[18:18] There is no real relationship with God outside of church and church gatherings. There is nothing going on actually inside. If this here what we are doing in church today is if this is the only time that you actually pray and worship when you are with other Christians.

If this is the only time you do those things. Jesus says you are a hypocrite. You are just putting it on. You are just putting on an outfit for Sunday and you are taking it off when you leave the church.

That is the third indicator of a hypocrite. They put on a religious outfit. The last indicator that Jesus gives us here of a hypocrite is that they pretend to be innocent.

They pretend to be innocent. Have a look from verse 29. Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous and you say if we had lived in the days of our ancestors we would not have taken part with them in the shedding of the blood of the prophets.

We wouldn't have done that. We would have never been that evil. We are good people. They weren't but we are. You know that tendency always to look at the evil people out there to compare yourselves and say no I'm good.

[19:44] I'm good people. They're bad people. That's what they were doing. And that is actually a giveaway of hypocrisy. It's an easy one to spot. Hypocrites think that they're okay.

They think that they're good enough as they are and they don't need to repent. They don't need a change. That is a very obvious and key indicator of a hypocrite.

They've got their routine. They go to church. They do this but nothing needs to change. Everything is fine as it is. Change is hard. Change is uncomfortable.

Hypocrites are fine they think. But that thinking of I'm fine as I am that is the one thing that actually stops them from being truly saved.

Because if you're a Christian if you know the gospel you'll know that to be saved we need to admit that we are not fine. And we need to keep admitting that we need Jesus.

[20:46] And we need to keep relying on Him. Hypocrites don't do that. Their mindset is I'm okay. I do the right things so I'm fine. I'm a good person. Now as we look at these four indicators that Jesus gives of hypocrisy we all need to look at them and ask is any of them true of me or you?

We've got to ask ourselves that question and if any of these things is true of you if your Christianity if you're really honest with yourself if your Christianity is just a show you might get away with that now.

You might fool the people around you really effectively but you will not get away with it when you stand before the Son of God who sees right through hypocrisy and is very serious about it.

You know if we get nothing else from this passage we realize Jesus does not like hypocrisy. Right? And that's the impression I get. He's very serious about it and he says in verse 33 to those who are just faking it just acting you snakes you brood of vipers how will you escape being condemned to hell?

hell? That's a really good question. How will the hypocrite escape being condemned to hell? Well they've got to stop being a hypocrite and so that's what we need to look at finally before we end this morning how to stop being a hypocrite.

[22:33] Now Jesus doesn't actually tell us in this passage how to stop being a hypocrite but as we read on in the story we realize something profound and something very comforting.

We realize as we read on in the story and see what happened in Jerusalem in the next few chapters that Jesus didn't just come to warn hypocrites but he came to die for hypocrites so that if they come clean about their true state and they rely on him he gives them the gift of his Holy Spirit to come and work on them not on the outside but on the inside.

That is the result of trusting in Christ and confessing and coming clean with God is that he gives you his own spirit to come inside and work on you from the inside out.

And it's what God has always promised to give his people because you know what if you read the Old Testament you realize God's people were constantly being hypocritical. They were constantly faking it.

They were constantly just being religious on the outside and the inside was unchanged and so you know what God did? He didn't just destroy them all which he could have done. No, he wanted to save them and he made an amazing promise.

[24:02] We read it earlier in Ezekiel. Isn't what he says again from Ezekiel 36? Because he loves his people. He wants to save them, even the hypocrites.

And he says this, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

That's the promise of God. And it was fulfilled when Jesus came and died for our sins. And when Jesus rose and ascended and gave his spirit to live in his people who trust in him.

That is how to stop being a hypocrite. That is the only way to stop being a hypocrite. Receive God's very spirit to change you from the inside out. There was a man named Nicodemus.

He was one of these Pharisees. One of these hypocrites Jesus was talking about here. But Nicodemus and Jesus had some private conversations and Jesus was trying to explain to Nicodemus this very thing that you need God's spirit to change you from the inside out.

[25:22] And he put it in these words when Jesus and Nicodemus this Pharisee were talking Jesus said very truly I tell you no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at me saying you must be born again. Nicodemus didn't understand what he was talking about then.

But later after Nicodemus watched the events and he heard what Jesus said here in Jerusalem and he saw Jesus going to die on the cross and he understood what it meant and he realized that Jesus rose from the dead he was changed he believed and he was born again Nicodemus was into a new person into a brand new person and he became a Christian but a true Christian where the Holy Spirit was changing him from the inside out he was eventually what Jesus was describing to him he

had born again he became a new person even though he had been devoted to God as this religious Pharisee for years and years and years and years when he trusted in Christ and relied on him he became a new person are you born again into a new person yet maybe you're a Christian on the outside and you've been for a long time but are you a

Christian on the inside yet is the Holy Spirit here working changing you do you love God do you seek his will in your life daily is the Holy Spirit evidently at work in changing your desires and your thoughts changing you from the inside out is that happening in your life I cannot answer that question for you only you can answer that question I was once a hypocrite I was I went to church I I was fine on the outside the people around me thought I was a believer I said all the right things and I did that for years until in 2001 God opened my eyes through me hearing the word and I truly believed and something changed and I realized in hindsight

I received God's spirit that came alive in me I was really saved in that moment and when I look back at those years of just pretending I realize how exhausting that is to come to church and to pretend to be someone I'm not I wasn't engaged with what was going on my heart wasn't in it was just a waste of time it was so exhausting to pretend I didn't realize I was doing it until I was really born again but now looking back it was just it was exhausting maybe that's your experience coming to church doesn't make you alive it doesn't connect you with God it's just going through the motions well then you still need to be born again and God is so ready to give you his spirit if you come to him and ask him the Bible says he will not withhold his Holy Spirit from those who truly ask him and come to him and admit their need for his spirit to come in and dwell in them if you have not been baptized yet that is such a key moment where

[29 : 27] God promises that through that sign it's a physical representation of what God promises to do for his to receive his spirit then come to me and talk to me we we must we must have a baptism service again where a number of people it's so beautiful when we do it a number of people come and say I need God to come and I need to change me to just admit I'm not fine by myself and if you have been baptized and maybe you know as a Christian and you've seen the Holy Spirit's at work in you and you know and you can feel and you can see fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control.

And you can see that developing in your life and you can see your growth as a Christian. You know the Holy Spirit's there. How do you respond to this? What is the application in this for you?

Well, I think we need to realize as Christians, and I realized this since I truly was saved, we all still have hypocritical tendencies that sneak in from time to time.

You know, even if we're truly saved, we can also be hypocrites a little bit at a time. And that's why Peter, when he's writing to Christians later on in 1 Peter 2, he writes, even to Christians he says, put off hypocrisy.

He says, you need to make sure that you keep putting off hypocritical tendencies. And so that means that all of us, we need to take time to spot, to examine ourselves, to spot hypocrisy when it comes and to repent of it.

[31 : 09] And then to keep on asking the Holy Spirit to come in anew. It's not a one-off thing. We need to keep being filled with the Spirit and keep asking God, who will not deny His children when they ask Him for His Spirit to work in them and keep changing them.

And we need to keep praying. Like the prayer that I've been praying this whole week, the collect from last week, because I used the app. And every day during my quiet time, I went to the app and I just prayed this prayer.

I encourage you to do that. Now that the collect's on the app, go and use these prayers in your own personal prayer time. I've been praying this prayer this whole week, and I will end with it.

It says, grant us, Lord, we pray, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right. That we, who cannot do anything that is good without you, may by you be able to live according to your will through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Yes, Lord, we thank you for your word today. And we pray that you would help us to heed this warning. We praise you, Lord Jesus, that you came not just to warn hypocrites, but to die for hypocrites.

[32 : 35] And so, Lord, will you help us to take on board what you're saying. Help us to be on guard against hypocrisy in our lives.

And Lord, we praise and thank you that you have done an amazing thing in sending your Spirit to dwell in us and change us. And so we pray that you would grant us that Spirit once more.

Because we cannot do anything that is good without you. Would you live and dwell in us and work through us what is pleasing to you in Jesus' name. Amen.