

What's So Bad about Hypocrisy?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 13: 10-17

Delivered on August 25, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

My sermon for today is titled “What’s So Bad about Hypocrisy?” Or you might say “What’s so bad about being a hypocrite?” But there is clearly something bad about being a hypocrite. At least Jesus seemed to think so. In our gospel story for today he calls the leader of the synagogue a hypocrite, and I do not think he means it as a complement. In fact, isn’t it hard to imagine anyone calling you a hypocrite and meaning it as a complement? You can try and say it in the nicest way, but still, it doesn’t sound like a complement. “Look at those adorable little hypocrites!” or “Sir, we are offering you this promotion because we are impressed with your hard work and dedication, but most of all we are impressed with your hypocrisy!” or “Honey, your beauty and intelligence are only exceeded by your hypocrisy!” We would think whoever said such things would mean it as a joke.

Being a hypocrite is not good, and that is something no one can deny. But I also have little patience for those who think that being a hypocrite is the worst thing you can ever be. You have probably heard people say “I don’t want to go to church because that’s where all the hypocrites are.” And every now and then I have run across parents who have said “I don’t want to tell my children not to take drugs because I used to take drugs at their age and that would make me a hypocrite—I don’t want to tell my children not to drink because I used to drink at that age and that would make me a hypocrite.” Is being a hypocrite really so bad that it is better to be an irresponsible parent? Is being a hypocrite really so bad that it is better to neglect your own children?

So what is wrong with being a hypocrite and if it is not the worst thing in the world, then just how bad is it? Well, I think we can answer those questions, but in order to do so, let us first think about what a hypocrite is not. A hypocrite is not someone who just happens to believe in standards that they themselves do not hold or have not always held. Maybe when you were a kid decades ago you did things that you wouldn't dare do now and you wouldn't encourage others to do now. That doesn't make you a hypocrite. That just means you grew up. It would have been better had you not done those things when you were young that you no longer do, but until we have time travel there is no going back and changing the past. It is what it is. But what about now? What if I now do things that I don't believe in doing? Well, you know what? That doesn't make me a hypocrite either. Each week in this church, I confess that I am a sinner. I confess that there is a standard which God has given me of perfection that I have not now and in this lifetime, I suppose, will never meet. But failing to meet this standard, while it makes me a sinner does not make me a hypocrite. People who think churches are full of hypocrites may be right to some extent, but I fail to see how believing myself to be a sinner in need of God's grace makes me a hypocrite. Would you rather I call myself perfect? That would make me more of a hypocrite, not less of one. And finally, a hypocrite I think is not even someone who holds double standards. I think there is something deeply wrong with people who hold double standards, but I don't think that makes hypocrites. You may think that you should be allowed to do things that your pastor should not do. I knew a man who left this church one time because they hired a new pastor named Shirley and Shirley was a smoker, but the man was also a smoker. So she called the man up and asked him why he left and he said "Well, you smoke and I have a problem with that."

“Well, sir, don’t you smoke.”

He said, “Yeah but that’s different, I’m not the pastor.” I don’t agree with those kinds of double standards in the church. Whatever standard you hold me to is the standard you should hold yourself to. Whatever standard you hold the session to is a standard you should hold yourself to. But having double standards, while they are bad, do not by themselves make you a hypocrite.

What then is a hypocrite? Well, a hypocrite, I think is someone who is dishonest. They don’t necessarily know that they are dishonest, sometimes they are dishonest to themselves. In our gospel lesson for today Jesus calls the leader of the synagogue a hypocrite because he condemns Jesus for doing work on the Sabbath by healing. Jewish law said you weren’t supposed to do any work on the Sabbath. And I don’t know for sure, but I think this leader of this synagogue probably tells himself that he doesn’t work on the Sabbath. But that is untrue, Jesus points out, and so the man is a hypocrite even if he is only lying to himself. So hypocrites are dishonest and we tend not to like hypocrites because we don’t like dishonest people. There is something about being lied to which is hurtful in ways that few things are. We feel violated when we are lied to. But a hypocrite is not just a liar about anything, they are a liar about something important, they are a liar about morality which is one of the most important things of all. A hypocrite is lying about something more than whether your dress looks flattering, or your haircut is too short. They are claiming to be something they are not in a way that matters and that matters a great deal.

For think about it, what matters more than morality? What matters more than whether someone is a good person or a bad person? Doesn’t Bill Cosby’s predatory behavior where he

took advantage of so many innocent women matter more than whatever talent he had as a comedian and an entertainer, even though, yes, he was a wonderful comedian and entertainer. Didn't whatever OJ Simpson did to two innocent people on a June night back in 1994 matter more than all his athletic accomplishments, even though yes, he was quite an athlete? And today as I read the newspaper headlines about our trade negotiations with China and I read about the environmental catastrophe going on in the Amazon, I can't help but think about how Richard Nixon's Presidency was in many ways such a great Presidency because his accomplishments are still so relevant today. We would not be talking about our relationship with China had it not been for Nixon who established that relationship. We would not be talking about our national environmental policy had it not been for Nixon establishing the EPA. But what do we remember Nixon for? Watergate, a word that not only symbolizes a break-in into an office complex, but a whole network of lies, cover-up, hush-money, and bribes. The reason we have so little tolerance for hypocrites and the reason their dishonesty cuts us so deeply is because they are dishonest about what matters.

But is being a hypocrite the worst thing you can possibly be? Well, I think not. Because there is a reason a hypocrite is dishonest, and it is because the hypocrite usually feels great shame. The hypocrite lies to himself or he lies to you, because he cannot face who he really is. And if that is who he is, then is that really the worst thing you can be? What about the person who says I am proud to be a serial killer and I don't care who knows it. I am proud to be an embezzler and I don't care who knows it. I am proud to be a child abuser and I don't care who knows it. The hypocrite is a liar, but he is a liar because he recognizes the value of what matters in life, and he cannot face himself or you for failing to promote its value, or to honor its value.

And because this is who the hypocrite is, I am convinced that the only thing that can ever save us from hypocrisy is the gospel of Jesus Christ. For in those moments when we cannot face who we are or what we have done, here is what we are promised. Scripture says “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died---more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

If you believe that, but only if you believe that, then what on earth is there to be a hypocrite about? What on earth is there to lie to yourself about, or lie to others about? So what if someone else condemns you? The God of the universe sent his only son to die for you. So what if someone else judges you? God says you are justified. God says all your sins are wiped clean. So what if you can’t look at yourself? Because Jesus Christ took our place on the cross, when God looks at you and all the rotten things you’ve done, he only sees all the things that Christ has done.

Now, maybe you don’t believe that. Maybe you have a hard time accepting that God could ever be so merciful, or that grace could ever be so gracious. But if you do accept it, then what is there to be dishonest about? What is it that you want to hide from the world? Who cares if someone condemns you? Who are they? God is for you. The God of the universe is for you.

You know, whenever I talk about movies in my sermons, I try to only use old movies. I don’t want to talk about movies that are currently at the box office, because you might want to go see them and I don’t want to spoil them. And by the way I have a penchant for spoiling movies. When I was seven I remember Rocky II came out at and I went to go see it with my brother and

our grandmother I think. Now, as I feel sure all of you know, the whole Rocky series was about the boxing career of a character played by Sylvester Stallone, and the first movie, Rocky won best picture at the Oscars, but in that movie, sadly, Rocky lost his championship bout to Apollo Creed played by Carl Weathers. So the big question was what would happen in the sequel when there was a rematch between Rocky and Apollo Creed. And you see, my father wanted to see the movie and so when we got home, he said "Please don't tell me anything about it, I want to see it for myself."

I said, "Come on dad, it was so good just let me tell you a little about it."

"No, no, don't say a word, I want to see it for myself."

"But dad, I won't tell you about the whole movie, just let me tell you a little about it."

He said, "No, I don't want to hear one thing about it, I want to see it for myself."

"But dad, dad, just let me tell you two words, just two words."

"Ok, you can tell me two words."

"Rocky Won." Yeah, he was not happy.

So I promise I will not say anything to you like that and give away anything important about this movie, but if you have not seen the movie *Yesterday*, it is about this struggling musician who lives in England in the present day, and I mean this guy is really struggling. Only his best friends care anything for his music. He can't get anyone to show up for his performances. He's really struggling and he's about to give up. Well, one day he gets hit by a bus, and he wakes up in the hospital, but something is different. He quotes some popular Beatles song to his best friend when he's lying in his hospital bed, but she doesn't know what he's talking about. When he gets better he sits down with all his friends and cranks out the ballad "Yesterday" on guitar

and they've never heard it before. And finally he sits down at his computer and he googles the word "Beatles" and the only thing that comes up is pictures of insects. After getting hit by the bus, you see, this struggling musician woke up in a world where the Beatles never existed. A world with no White Album, no Yellow Submarine, no Abbey Road, no Strawberry Fields, no John, Paul, George and Ringo, no nothing. It has all been erased from history. Now, struggling musician, no Beatles, you can probably figure out what happens after that. But you will have to do the figuring, I won't give it away.

But you see, that is what happens to us on the cross. All of the things we could ever do to sin against God have been erased from history; it is as if they never existed. So what is it that we have to hide from? What is it that we have to be hypocritical about?

"I won't go to church, you hear people say, the church is full of hypocrites. Isn't it ironic, isn't it so ironic that the church is the only place that has the cure for hypocrisy?