

When Christians Go Too Far In Self-Righteousness

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

Copyright © 2011, Bill Couch. All rights reserved worldwide.
This material may be printed or copied for personal use only.

This morning we begin a new series of messages entitled “When Christians Go Too Far.” Sometimes as Christians we can become so focused on being right and doing the right thing that we go too far. We turn people off to Christianity because we have an attitude that we are better than others. In this series of messages we are going to look at some of the roadblocks that our attitudes and behaviors create for persons who are considering the Christian faith. This morning we are going to look at self-righteousness or hypocrisy. Jesus had a lot to say to the religious leaders in his day about their self-righteousness.

Matthew 23:1-7

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.’

Mahatma Gandhi, Hindu political leader in India in the 1930s and '40s, once told the Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” He also said, “I would have been a Christian except for Christians.”

Like Gandhi, many people have rejected the Christian faith primarily because of the attitudes and actions of Christians. According to a recent Barna Institute survey, forty percent of persons between the ages of 15 and 29 have opted out of church. The number one reason these young persons cite for rejecting the church is because of the hypocrisy of Christians. The second reason is because of the judgmental attitude of Christians especially toward homosexuality. The third reason is that the church pushes a political agenda. One

young person said in the survey: “I don’t go to church because I don’t want to be associated with those kinds of people.” Ouch!

In this series of messages I want us to look honestly at how Christians are viewed by non-Christians. It will help us to know where we have gone too far, where our attitudes may be excessive. In the process we will take a look at Jesus. What did Jesus have to say to the religious persons in his day who went too far? We will look at how Jesus consistently lived out his values. How can we live in such a way that others are attracted to Jesus rather than repelled by the Christian faith?

For 2011, God has put on my heart three areas of focus for our church:

- To expand our Impossible Dreams’ outreach—making a difference for the Kingdom of God. We will focus on this during the Lenten season and encourage you to participate in a community impact day on the Saturday following Easter. We will scatter out in teams all over this community to care for the needs of people and make a difference for the Kingdom of God. (2009)
- To enhance our experience of worship to enable persons to connect with the living God. This is our prayer for worship each week. (2010)
- To pray for persons around us who need to know and experience God’s love and grace. Pray for an opportunity to invite them to church or to group or ministry. Pray for an opportunity to share our faith with them. (2011)

This series of messages will help us with the third focus. As we seek to invite others to experience God’s love and grace, what are some of the obstacles we need to get out of the way? How do our attitudes and behaviors create roadblocks for people who are considering the Christian faith?

Today we are going to consider the number one objection young persons cited for rejecting the church: hypocrisy. Simply defined a hypocrite is someone who pretends to

be something he/she is not. An owner of a lumber yard in a community nearby told me that he had a customer who espoused to be a leader in his church. Every time he came to the lumber yard, he invited the owner to come to his church. Frequently when he walked out of the store he would pick up a small tool—a screwdriver or pair of pliers—and slip it into his pocket without paying. The owner of the store said to me, “I’m glad I know Jesus, because if that man were the only Christian I knew I would not want any part of it.” What attitudes and behaviors do we have that cause people to say, “I don’t want to be associated with those people”?

William Barclay said, “Hypocrisy is the easiest of sins to fall into and of all the sins the one most strongly condemned by Jesus.” Some scholars believe that the reason Jesus was crucified is because he exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Let’s look at what Jesus said to those leaders and ask if those teachings might apply to us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said these things to the religious leaders:

Matthew 6:2

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:5

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:16

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

The religious leaders were doing good things: praying, fasting and helping the needy. The problem was their motive for doing those things: to be seen and praised by others. They wanted to impress others with their spirituality so they would be admired. They had a need to be affirmed for their goodness. This is a danger for church leaders today. This is something I struggle with. When I am preparing a message, I sometimes focus on my desire

to impress you so that you will admire me. That's ugly and I'm not proud of it—but it is a real struggle. I have to bring myself to focus on what message God wants me to bring to you rather than on what I think will impress you. When I preach on tithing, you can be assured that it is something that I believe God wants you to hear because I know it will not make me popular! We all have to examine our motives and none of us has pure motives. Our reasons for doing good things are often a mixture of Godly and selfish motives. To some degree, we all like to be noticed and appreciated for the good things we are doing. A question we have to ask ourselves is: "Are we using God or letting God use us?"

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asked:

Matthew 7:3

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

The religious leaders were quick to point out the failings of others, but could not see their own shortcomings. After a person becomes a follower of Christ his/her behavior changes. In an effort to live a life that honors Christ, a person might quit cussing or getting drunk. Now that he is free from that habit, he notices it more when his friends use the Lord's name in vain. He begins to feel like he is better than they are. Satan has just won a battle. He got the guy to trade cussing for pride which is far more dangerous for the soul. Spiritual pride is one of the deadliest sins. Do you feel that you are better than hopeless persons, drug addicts or persons of a different race? Whenever we have an attitude that we are better than someone else, the claws of self-righteousness have gripped our hearts.

In Matthew 23, Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees were meticulous tithers. If they grew an oregano plant in their garden, they would count out 10 leaves. They would put nine in their pantry and put one in the synagogue offering box. Jesus warned that they focused on the minutia at the expense of the things that really mattered to God: "justice, mercy and faithfulness." (Matthew 23:23) The religious leaders refused to associate with sinners—

sinner were those who did not believe exactly as they did. They were right and everyone else was wrong. What turns people off to the church today is one group of Christians claiming they have it right and all the others are wrong. Some claim that only adults can be baptized and only by immersion and only within their denomination. Others claim children must be baptized in order for them to go to heaven. One of the things that I appreciate about the United Methodist Church is our open mindedness on these issues. If you have been baptized as a Christian in any church as a baby or adult, we accept your baptism. You do not have to be baptized in a certain way. You can be sprinkled, poured or immersed. We allow the parents to decide whether to baptize their babies or not. We believe that the Bible allows latitude in these matters and that our way is not the only way. Now the danger is that we develop United Methodist spiritual pride because our way of open-mindedness is better! Jesus did not say that his disciples would be known by a certain form of baptism or their open-mindedness, but by their love.

The reality of course is that everyone is a hypocrite. To some degree all of us pretend to be something we are not. We think our way is the right way and better than another way. What the world is looking for is authenticity and integrity. We need to admit that there is hypocrisy within us. People can accept that as long as we are honest.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables about lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin and two lost sons. Luke tells us at the beginning of the chapter why Jesus told these parables. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (Luke 15:1,2) Sinners were drawn to Jesus—he did not make them feel "less than." He did not condemn them. He made them feel special and accepted. If there is anyone who could be self righteous, it is Jesus. He is one hundred percent righteous and perfect. He could

have picked apart everyone else as not being as good as he was. But he did not. When he talked to sinners about God—they wanted to know more. Jesus exuded love.

People will be drawn to Jesus by our love not our self righteousness. They will be drawn to Jesus when we are authentic and real about our struggles and failures and that we have experienced God's unconditional love. They will find it refreshing if we admit we struggle with hypocrisy, there are times when we pretend to be something we are not. There are times when we do not live up to what we say we believe. People outside the church are looking for something real. May they know we are Christians by our love.