

Whenever surveys are done to discover the reasons people reject the Christian faith, one response is always near the top of the list. People like to say, “The church is filled with... (*what?*)...

Hypocrites!” Have you ever heard someone say that? Maybe *you’ve* said it before. Maybe that’s how you feel right now! The late **Dr. D. James Kennedy** used to say, “We’re not filled with hypocrites; there’s always room for one more, so come on in!” He cautioned people that if they ever found a perfect church, they ought not to join, since that would ruin it! But what is a hypocrite, anyway?

The term *hypocrite* actually comes from the world of Greek drama. In ancient times, certain actors or actresses played more than one role, and they indicated their role by holding a mask in front of their face. Even today, the theatre is symbolized by the twin masks of comedy and tragedy. That’s the origin of the concept of hypocrisy. It literally means to be two-faced!

Remember the story of New York Governor **Elliot Spitzer**? Last spring he was caught patronizing a prostitution ring. And the story was a nationwide sensation, not just because another political leader had fallen to a sex scandal, but because Spitzer had made his reputation as attorney general by *prosecuting* prostitution rings!

So in the public eye, Spitzer’s great crime was not that he was an adulterer, but that he was a hypocrite. He showed one face to the public – a morally righteous face, committed to the law – while the reality of his personal life was completely different. And you know, the harsh public reaction to such two-faced people is actually not so inconsistent with the attitude of Jesus.

We see it in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of **Mark’s Gospel**. Nothing angered Jesus more than the sin of hypocrisy. He was gentle and welcoming to prostitutes and other public sinners who came to Him for mercy. But His reaction to the self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees was scathing, to say the least.

The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders who made their reputation by their zeal to uphold and protect the law. The *commandments* of God were extremely important to them. But while they focused on the law, they overlooked the heart. The heart of their problem was the problem in their heart. And Jesus exposes the hypocrisy in **Mark 7** –

*1-8 - Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, 2 they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, 4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”*

So 1<sup>st</sup>, the Pharisees were guilty of **ELEVATING TRADITION ABOVE TRUTH** and Jesus identified this as evidence of hypocrisy. Now traditions can be a very good thing, but the danger arises when human traditions begin to overshadow God’s Word. And the irony is that the Pharisees were the most dedicated, committed religious people you could ever imagine.

Their intent was not to minimize the commandments of God. Their intent was to keep them. That's *why* they developed so many oral traditions. As they saw it, these traditions served as a fence around the Law, protecting God's holy Word and assisting people in their efforts to obey it.

They figured that the *Torah*, God's written law, was *policy*. But the oral tradition, or *Mishnah* as they called it, was needed in order to spell out in detail *how* the policies should be carried out in specific situations. But as the years passed, their fencing of the law produced some fabulous absurdities.

For example, in an effort to protect the Sabbath, the *Mishnah* said you couldn't look in the mirror on the Sabbath because you might find a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out, and that would be working on the Sabbath! So no mirrors on the Sabbath! Kind of crazy stuff like that. But the greatest concern of the *Mishnah* was the issue of "uncleanness," and that's the source of our controversy in **Mark 7**.

*"Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (v 5)* So were the disciples doing something wrong? What did the Word of God say about this? Well, the book of Exodus required the priests to wash their hands before entering the tabernacle (**30:19; 40:12**). But by the time of Christ, *all* Jews were washing their hands and doing it frequently, at least before every meal.

And this had nothing to do with personal hygiene, although I suppose that was a side benefit. But they weren't concerned about H1N1 or other viruses. They washed their hands as a *religious* ritual. It was a way of maintaining Jewish purity over against the dirty, ungodly Gentile culture around them.

And the Pharisees were obsessive about this – they washed all the time! And when they returned from the marketplace, having come in contact with all those sinners, they took a bath to re-establish their holiness!

As you can imagine, the Pharisees' commitment to this kind of ritual purity made them extremely pious, self-righteous... and obnoxious. So in our passage, they send an official delegation of theological "hitmen" to nail Jesus for the religious carelessness of His followers.

Because in their view, if anyone needed a good washing, it was Jesus and His crew. According to Jewish traditions, if you touched a Gentile, a leper, a tax collector, a corpse, or a menstruating woman, you were unclean. And as you know, Jesus and the 12 have touched all those in the first 6 chapters of Mark!

And yet they were not washing their hands. Why not? Well, not only were these traditions beyond what Scripture actually required, they also conveyed the wrong attitude toward people. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, not to isolate Himself from them or condemn them. The Pharisees' protest showed just how smug and superior was their attitude. So they must have been stunned when Jesus shoots back at them that devastating quotation about hypocrisy from the prophet Isaiah and applies it to them, saying –

*"You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men" (v 8)*. You're a pretender, Jesus says. You're a poser, acting like you have these high and noble desires to obey God, when your religious practices aren't backed by Scripture at all. You substitute man's word for God's Word. So in effect, you are destroying the influence and authority of the very Word of God that you claim to be defending.

In **v 9-13**, Jesus provides an example for the Pharisees: *And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) — 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

So apparently the Pharisees had an ingenious way of breaking the fifth commandment without feeling guilty. The law said, “Honor your father and mother” (**Exo 20:12**). But instead of using their wealth to support their parents, the Pharisees said, “Sorry, our wealth is dedicated to the service of God.” Brilliant!

Now realize, it doesn’t mean that they were actually putting their wealth in the offering. No, this was more like deferred giving. To call it “Corban” was to set it apart for God, but to retain possession of it now, for your own enjoyment. When you died, then this property would become owned by the temple.

And again, nothing wrong with the tradition. I mean, this really *can* be a wonderful way to honor the Lord even in your passing. Many generous Christians have made an eternal impact in their dying, by remembering churches and Christian organizations in their will. That’s a *good* thing.

But the Pharisees were taking a good thing and applying it in a selfish way. It wasn’t love for God that was motivating their behavior. They were just protecting their own assets, taking their wealth out of circulation, by permanently vowing it to the Lord. And Jesus unmasks the intent of their hearts.

He’s saying, “Look, you are trying to come across so spiritual by giving everything to God, but all you are really doing is harming your aging parents, depriving them of the support they need. You’re not practicing good stewardship. You’re squandering the resources God has entrusted to you, by walking away from what He has unambiguously commanded: “Honor your father and mother.”

And this wasn’t just an isolated or unusual example. This kind of hypocritical behavior was standard operating procedure among the Pharisees. “*Many such things you do,*” Jesus says.

Upholding human traditions in ways that eclipse biblical truth. Does this happen today? Absolutely. It’s good to search our own hearts here. Is the Word of God really guiding your life, or are you actually disobeying Scripture to uphold cultural expectations or manmade traditions, even religious ones?

We need to back up our convictions with the Bible! “*Sola Scriptura!*” was the cry of **Martin Luther** in the Protestant Reformation. “Scripture alone” as our guide in all matters of faith and practice. Traditions of man must never trump the truth of God.

More evidence of religious hypocrisy is uncovered in **v 14-23**, as Jesus accuses the Pharisees of **EMPHASIZING EXTERNALS OVER INTERNALS**.

*14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: 15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” 17 And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

So the Jews taught that if you ate forbidden or defiled food you were contaminated, and you needed a bath to cleanse you from this sin. But Jesus doesn’t buy that. He reverses the direction of the flow, saying it is actually inner impurities that defile things on the outside. Jesus saw uncleanness as a matter of the heart. And by *heart*, of course He’s not referring to the physical organ that pumps blood through your body. In the Bible, the heart is the center of the human personality. It’s your mind, will, and emotions.

Jewish rabbis often catalogued external infractions of the law, but Jesus goes beyond the surface to focus on the deeper evils of the human heart. And it's not pretty.

Jesus isn't describing the notorious criminal in **v 21-22**. He's describing all of us, whether rich or poor, high or low, young or old. By nature, all of us have a heart like this. It's a scary thought, but any of us are capable of any of these sins; the seeds lie in our hearts.

Modern psychology says that man is inherently good, and is only led into mischief by the influence of culture. But what makes up the culture, except people? And Jesus' description of human nature reminds us that every area of our lives is tainted with sin, and this sin originates in the hearts of men and women.

Scripture says, *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?* (**Jeremiah 17:9**) It's the inner life, the heart of man that is the problem. To focus on external behavior is to treat the symptom rather than the cause.

Wise is the parent then, who is not so concerned about outward conformity to a set of rules, but rather is concerned about what is going on in the heart of a child. You can regulate behavior all you want, by punishing the offense, but you don't change a life until the heart is transformed.

In **Matthew's** gospel, Jesus says, "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.*"

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*" (**23:25-28**)

So is this also an apt description of the church? Is it true that the church is full of hypocrites? That's kind of a tricky question – because a hypocrite is someone who gives false impressions, doing things he claims he does not do. So when outsiders see Christians sinning, they may rush to the judgment that "those people are hypocrites!"

But that's not necessarily true, because Christians don't claim to be without sin. For a Christian simply to demonstrate that he is a sinner does not convict him of hypocrisy. In fact, the church is the only institution around that requires an admission of being a sinner in order to be a member.

So if the charge was simply "the church is full of sinners," we should definitely be quick to plead guilty. The church *is* filled with sinners because the church is the place where sinners who confess their sins come to find redemption from their sins. Do you see the point? All hypocrisy is sin, but not all sin is the sin of hypocrisy.

However, that being said, there is no denying that hypocrisy is a sin with which Christians must grapple, even today. Like the Pharisees, we may begin well, seeking to live godly lives in submission to the Word of God, only to be embarrassed by our failures to reach those high standards.

And that's when it's easy to engage in pretense, pretending we are more righteous than we really are. We may give an outward façade of righteousness, hoping to conceal what's really going on in our hearts.

So if we think we are entirely innocent of the charge of hypocrisy, here are some questions to consider:  
- Do I want people to think better of me than I really am?

- Does it bother me when people don't notice my spiritual performance?
- Do I modify my actions to make sure others notice the way I am serving & giving, or praying like Jesus?
- Am I quick to condemn others but touchy when my own faults are pointed out?
- Do I spend much time looking spiritual but very little time on inner spirituality?

Whenever we emphasize external appearances, we are putting on the mask of the hypocrite, and an alarm should go off in our heads – not that we are worthless and probably not even saved in the first place – but that we need to rush back to the cross and to Jesus Christ in order to understand where our true righteousness lies.

Because in Christ we don't find a mask that conceals our face – but an entire wardrobe of clothing, which is His righteousness, and we receive it by faith. To be clothed in the righteousness of Christ is not an act of hypocrisy. It is an act of redemption, and it is our only hope of standing before a holy God.

This hope is illustrated in **v 24-30**, where Jesus sees evidence of authentic faith – a **HUMBLE DEPENDENCE ON THE THE GRACE OF GOD**. And Jesus sees it, not in a prominent religious leader or devout Jew, but in a common pagan woman who resided in Gentile territory, one of those “unclean” people the Pharisees tried so hard to avoid. I imagine Jesus was ready for a break after that tense conversation with the religious hypocrites, and perhaps that's why –

*In v 24-30, from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” 28 But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” 29 And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” 30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.*

In this episode we find Jesus practicing what He just preached, as He travels to the city of Tyre and demonstrates that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for God looks at the heart. And Tyre probably represented the most extreme expression of paganism that a first century Jew would expect to encounter. Talk about an unclean situation!

I like how one commentary puts it: *Of all the people who approach Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, this individual has the most against her from a Jewish perspective. v 26 reads like a crescendo of demerit: she is a woman, a Greek Gentile, from infamous pagans of Syrian Phoenicia. Even Levi the tax collector must have raised his eyebrows at this woman... She can claim none of the credits that a good Jew might bring to the Prophet of Nazareth. Her only cover letter is her desperate need. But despite such obstacles, the woman's heart is true, even if her credentials are wrong. She illustrates in the most unmistakable way the truth of the previous encounter with the Pharisees that if foods are not unclean, then neither are people!*

However, what do we do about **v 27** where Jesus compares this woman to a dog?! I mean, this seems kind of offensive, don't you think? Throughout the Bible, dogs are the *epitome* of uncleanness; they eat garbage and dead things. That's why the rabbis called Gentiles “the dogs of the world.” It may not be much different today, but certainly in Jesus time, to call someone a dog was hardly a compliment.

However, the Greek word for dog that is used in this verse is not the usual word for a wild street dog, but for a small tame dog that could be kept in the house as a pet. It's definitely a kinder image, with no hostility or contempt implied. And it's obvious that the woman takes no offense by the comment.

She knows when Jesus says, "*Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs*" – He is simply affirming the priority of His mission to the Jews, and she accepts that. But she also knows that there is enough mercy in the Messiah to feed other hungry mouths as well.

So *she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* And so, from a one-sentence parable spoken to her by Jesus, this woman gets it. She understands and accepts His mission, and she has faith that there is room in His mission for her. She knew she was a Gentile, not from the chosen nation, not a child of the household.

But the bottom line is that she depended upon Christ's goodness and not her own. It was all of grace. She was saying, "Lord, if you say I am a little dog, I am. But that means I have a Master, and that Master is You. And I know You are good Master, so I am content to be a humble part of the household. I'll gladly take even the crumbs of your mercy!"

And for this, she became part of the fulfillment of Christ's prophetic word recorded in **Matthew 8:11-12**– "*I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.*"

Like this woman, you may not have had all the advantages of being raised in a household of faith. Then again maybe you have. But either way, you must approach Jesus like this woman did, humbly.

For Jesus said, "*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*" (**Matt 23:12**). This Gentile woman is a model to us of authentic, humble, saving faith. She wears no masks; she is real. There is no pomp or pretension in her. She is not worried about appearances, or maintaining her position, or staying in control.

She could sing, "*Your grace has found me just as I am, empty-handed but alive in Your hands.*" That's a song the hypocrite cannot sing, at least not from the heart. Because the hypocrite takes pride in what he brings to God; he exalts in his own outward righteousness.

And that's why hypocrisy is a soul-ruining sin, because it draws us away from the true righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. I think this is why Jesus reserved His harshest warnings for the hypocrite. Unlike straightforward sins, like theft or adultery – sins that often drive people to seek the Lord and His mercy – hypocrisy is a sin that keeps us away from God's grace, for we are depending on ourselves.

To come to God through Christ is to come as a sinner humbly seeking grace. Have you done this? If so, then you have no need to be exalted for false righteousness, since you already have the genuine article, the very righteousness of God credited to your account as a free gift of mercy to you in Christ, who died for your sins.

And if you have not yet come to Christ in humble faith, today you may do so. There is no use pretending that we are keeping the commandments, because Jesus sees our hearts.

Scripture says, *No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account* (**Heb 4:13**). Let's bow before Him now, to surrender our hearts to Him and receive His grace and forgiveness....