

Being a “Holy Hypocrite”: Living a Life in the Forgiveness of Jesus and the Sanctification of the Holy Spirit

*“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the **hypocrites** do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward...And when you pray, you must not be like the **hypocrites**. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward....And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the **hypocrites**, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:2, 5,16)*

Hypocrites are bad, right? We don't want to be a hypocrite! Of all the things that Christians get called (usually by non-Christians), the one that stings most is a **judgmental hypocrite**. And they seem to have Jesus to back them up! For Jesus says hypocrites are self-serving, self-righteous, and sanctimonious (self-holy)! We don't want to be a hypocrite, but it seems that no matter what we do, we are equated with them. “But Pastor Heaton, the title of this article is ‘Being a Hypocrite’! Doesn't that go against what Jesus says?” Well...umm...yes? No? Kinda?

I'll tell you what I mean in a moment. But to start, let's be clear with our terms and definitions. What is a hypocrite in Jesus' context? Hypocrisy is a *jarring contradiction between outward appearance and inward lack of righteousness*. A hypocrite is **someone who says one thing but does another**. Or does one thing while saying another. Consider Matthew 7:3-5:

*“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You **hypocrite**, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”*

Jesus condemns those who judge others for their wrongdoing, **but fail to see their own sin**. The hypocrite, Jesus says, is to first deal with one's own sin before denouncing another. The hypocrite is one who fails to do God's will, but hides behind the pious appearance of outward conduct. So, the root cause of hypocrisy is sin...and failure to address it.

A Life of Repentance and Forgiveness

The first thing to note is that in statements about hypocrisy and hypocrites, **Jesus never condones sinful behavior of any kind**. And He does not say NOT to denounce sin. What He actually says is, “*Judge not, **that you be not judged**. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*” (Matthew 7:1-2) Whatever standard one uses to judge others is the same standard that is used for the one judging. By the way, that standard is God's Law and Will! So, dealing with “hypocrisy” is first to deal

with one's own sin. *For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...* so says St. Paul. Fall short is a bit bland—it's more like **to completely lack something due to one's fault or failure**. So, we are all sinners, through and through. No one is exempt. No one achieves righteousness or holiness on own's one. So, what is a sinful person to do?

Run to the cross and receive the forgiveness of Jesus. The next part of Paul's verse in Romans 3: *...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.* We are put in right standing with God through the redemptive work of Jesus. Jesus is the one whose blood covers every sin; there is only one source of forgiveness and redemption. We receive this as a gift—God's unmerited favor given to us. We don't earn it or buy it. We just receive. And while this forgiveness is achieved through the one-time act of Jesus on the cross, we need to hear the word of forgiveness again and again. Because we continue to "*daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment.*"¹ So, we are to be repentant of our own sin. **This means that we are aware of it, we are sorry for it, and we own it.** But that is half of it. We also **trust in the word of forgiveness that Jesus gives**, that it does what it says it will do—absolve us from guilt and allow us to live in the mercy of God.²

Practically speaking, this forgiveness given is *that which is heard*. It is spoken by another. It is spoken by the pastor, both publicly and privately, in worship and private confession. It is delivered in the Supper, but again spoken in the words, "Given and shed for you." The *for you* is the chief thing in the Sacrament, for it is forgiveness.³ Forgiveness is also given *by the saints to the saints*. While we are sinners, we are also saints—declared holy ones by Jesus through the Spirit. So, in the priesthood of all believers,⁴ we do the work of absolution by declaring forgiveness to one another. This forgiveness of Jesus is heard in the life of worship, in the life of faith, in the life of Body of Christ.

Calling Sin a Sin with Boldness and Clarity

So, in the forgiveness of Jesus, standing justified with the Father by the blood of Jesus, **we then can boldly call anything contrary to the will of God what it is—sin**. When non-Christians, or nominal Christians⁵ are quick to call us hypocrites, they are usually defending wicked behavior of some sort. Let me try to explain the "logic". Person A tells Person B that they have sinned. Person B calls Person A a "hypocrite", indicating that Person A has done just as many sinful things as Person B. Person A therefore, has no right to judge Person B because they are just as big a sinner. Person B might even bring up the aforementioned words of Jesus to support their

¹ *Luther's Small Catechism*, The Lord's Prayer, Explanation to the Fifth Petition.

² Repentance is **both** contrition for sin and faith in the promise of forgiveness.

³ *Luther's Large Catechism*, The Sacrament of the Altar, paragraph 21-22.

⁴ 1 Peter 2:9-10

⁵ I use this term not as an insult. I know nothing about where anyone stands with the Lord. I can only observe what people say and do. There are people, however, who claim to be Christian, but want nothing to do with Jesus. In other words, they are Christian *in name only*.

own condemnation of hypocrisy.⁶ Person A cowers and slinks away, having been called a hypocrite by Person B. And the sin that was addressed is left to fester and grow.⁷

Folks, calling sin a sin is not “being judgmental”. **Calling sin a sin is what the Body of Christ is supposed to do.** Living in the mercy of God, we are to condemn sinful behavior in our own lives, in the lives of our families, in the lives (gasp!) of our neighbors, and even in the lives of our community and government. And if you think I’m “being judgmental” THEN READ THE BIBLE!!! Listen to Jesus. Listen to Paul. But we are called to be holy ones that we might remove sin from our midst and deal with it in the plain light of day. Especially in the Church. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Paul here rhetorically is dealing with those “inside the Church”. The goal of condemnation, though, is not to go on a power trip, or to be sanctimonious, but the goal is always REPENTANCE. To turn from sin and turn back to Jesus. This gets messy, and it’s hard, and uncomfortable, but we are *called to belong to Jesus Christ*⁸ and *called to be saints*.⁹ So, when we see sin in our lives and practiced in our midst, we are to condemn it. Now, HOW we go about doing this is another whole conversation...(we are to speak the truth in love),¹⁰ but the purpose of this article is to talk about *being a holy hypocrite*. What do I mean by this?

The Woman and the Son

One of the most common ways people talk about their life of faith is in *not wanting to be a hypocrite*. This is especially true with parents and grandparents. Christians (because of the reasons listed above) don’t want to be accused of being a hypocrite, or even feel like one. To be called a hypocrite often stops people from *doing their duties in their given vocations*. The best way to unpack this is through the following scenario:

While in high school and during college, a certain woman lived a licentious lifestyle. She engaged in sexual immorality, in drunkenness and in co-habitation.¹¹ Since that time, she

⁶ It’s amazing the bible scholarship on display in these conversations!

⁷ This is in part where we have lost the cultural battle on issues like homosexuality, pornography, co-habitation, and a whole host of issues. We never get past the “hypocrisy” charge in the public square.

⁸ Romans 1:6.

⁹ Romans 1:7.

¹⁰ Passive-aggressively posting something on Facebook is not the answer!

¹¹ This used to be called “living in sin”. Today it seems to be a “useful accommodation”!

became more regular in her worship habits, she was mentored by other Christian women, and *she repented of her past sins*. She even confessed them privately to her pastor and received absolution for those things that deeply troubled her heart. She changed her life, all in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This woman eventually met a man, got married and raised a family in the faith as best they could.

That woman's son has now gone off to college. During this time, he has fallen in with "a crowd" and began to drink to excess and have casual sexual relationships with several girls. While the woman doesn't know "the details", she knows enough. She's lived the life, and she knows the signs. She has tried talking with him about this, but she is largely ignored. Her son is now living with a girl. She knows nothing about her. He has hidden this from his mother, but again, a mother knows. Besides, she knows lying when she sees it! She wants to confront her son. He clearly is living against God's express and explicit will. He has stopped attending worship, and doesn't come around his parents very often.

One of the problems the woman has is *tremendous guilt*. She feels like she is a hypocrite, because when she was his age, *she did the very same things*. How can she say anything to him now? How can she "judge" his lifestyle? Besides, while her son doesn't know details, he has found out about some of his mother's past. He has even made some comments about "not judging him" considering the things that she did! However, this feeling of being a hypocrite is very strong. She doesn't feel like she has a leg to stand on. But she also knows that her son's irresolute life is NOT God pleasing. She is even worried about his standing before God...has he walked away from the faith? Has he rejected Jesus?

The woman, in desperation, comes to talk to her pastor. This is truly a last resort! She shares these things with him (in perfect confidence) and asks his counsel. Her pastor assures her that she is a child of God and she is forgiven of her past by the blood of Jesus. While she knows this (she came to terms with her own past a long time ago), it is comforting to once again hear the words of forgiveness. But she still has a conflict: **who is she to say anything to her son?**

Here is what the pastor has to say: **be a hypocrite**. It is her duty to **lovingly**¹² tell her son that he is sinning and endangering his faith. While the promises God makes are certain and sure, *people can and do walk away from them of their own, free, sinful will*. But she must be a hypocrite, that is, **saying and exhorting one thing when she has lived and done another**. She must be willing to say to her son: what you are doing is wrong, it is sinful, and it goes against God's law. She knows first-hand how destructive this lifestyle can be, and she must confront her son in his sinful behavior.

¹² Love does not equal being nice or ignoring sin.

If you haven't caught on yet, there is a difference in what Jesus was talking about and what this woman is going through. *The difference is repentance and forgiveness.* The woman has clearly seen the beam in her own eye, and it has been removed by Jesus! She is free from that log. She can see clearly now. *She is still a sinner, till the day she dies, but she is also a forgiven saint.* She has been made holy by the Spirit. He is working in her life, leading and guiding her, and bringing her back to Jesus. This is what is called *sanctification*—a fancy word for the work of the Spirit.¹³ And, as the pastor tells her, the goal to confronting her son is that he would be led to repentance...just like she was, and that he would change his life.

Being a Holy Hypocrite

Folks, in every other area of life, *we have no problem passing on our bad experiences to our children and grandchildren in an effort to caution them to not make the mistakes we made.* We have no compunction about warning our kids not to use credit cards if we've had bankruptcy in our past, or not to drop out of college if we have regrets over an unfinished degree. **But with matters of the faith and matters of morality, we are scared to death of being called a hypocrite, of feeling like one, and looking like one in the eyes of the world.** In response to this fear, I say, **be a holy hypocrite.** Be bold in saying, "I don't want you to do the same, stupid, wicked, evil things that I did! Please don't do it! It's wrong! God condemns it. Please repent of your sin and return to Jesus." *That should be our stance.* No...we don't say one thing while doing another. We don't live a corrupt lifestyle while preaching piety. We don't watch porn secretly while turning away publicly from overt sexuality. To be sure, **our inner life and outer life should match.** And when it doesn't, we repent and in the forgiveness of Jesus, we do better. We try harder. God will give you the power and strength to change. I have seen it firsthand.

But we owe it to our families and congregations to confront lies, immorality, and perversion where we see it. Because when we don't, we lose. Our families lose. Our congregations lose. Our society comes apart at the seams. What we need is more "holy hypocrites"...**people who are willing to do and say something different than what they've said and done in the past.** In the power of the Spirit, we can do it. For we are called holy ones. We must pass this life of faith that we have been given down to the next generation. Part of that is teaching the faith, but another is confronting sin where it lies and directing hearts and minds to Christ.

¹³ The work of sanctification is ongoing in the life of the Christian. As long as we live in the "old age", we need the Spirit's work of making us holy.