

“CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY”

I. Introduction

- A. Hypocrisy is a matter of appearing one way on the outside while actually living another way.
 - 1. In the religious sense, hypocrisy is about being very concerned about giving the appearance of holiness while having no interest in cultivating true holiness in your heart.
 - 2. The world is quick to point out instances of hypocrisy in the church’s ranks.
 - 3. We see this whenever a prominent pastor or a leader of some influential Christian organization is caught doing something that is in conflict with the principles that he publicly upheld.
 - 4. When that happens, the media is always there to shine a spotlight on the scandal.
- B. This is not just a fixation of the contemporary media.
 - 1. We all find hypocrisy to be loathsome, and it is loathsome.
 - 2. This is made clear by the response of the Lord Jesus when he saw hypocrisy in the lives of Israel’s religious leaders.
 - 3. Jesus confronted and condemned hypocrisy.
 - 4. This is the focus of the text that we are studying this morning.
 - 5. In these verses, we are given a picture of what hypocrisy looks like.

II. Adhering to Externals While Neglecting the Internal

- A. The passage begins with Jesus accepting an invitation to dine in the home of a Pharisee.
1. While some have suggested that this Pharisee was setting a trap for Jesus, the fact that he was surprised when he saw that Jesus did not wash before the dinner seems to indicate that he was at least curious about the things that Jesus had to say.
 2. The washing that Luke is referring to here was not a matter of hygiene but a matter of ceremonial purity
 3. That being said, it is important to point out that Jesus was not disregarding God's law by foregoing this washing.
 4. There was no such requirement in God's law.
 5. Instead, the Jewish leaders had invented this as a way of testifying to their high regard for ceremonial purity.
 6. Jesus certainly would have known about the ritual washings practiced by the Pharisees.
 7. This means his abstention from washing before this meal was intentional.
 8. This brings to mind a gathering of Protestants in the city of Zurich one evening during the season of Lent in 1522.
 9. Those present purposely ate sausages, knowing full well that the Roman Catholic Church forbade the eating of meat during Lent. [see D.G. Hart, *Calvinism: A History*, 1]
 10. In a similar manner, Jesus confronted man-made rules by refusing to be bound by them.
- B. When Jesus saw his host's astonishment at his refusal to wash, he pointed out the problem that afflicted the Pharisees, saying, "you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and

wickedness.”

1. The Pharisees focused on outward forms of piety but they neglected the heart.
 2. Jesus’s words make it clear that God is not satisfied with religion that is merely outward.
 3. He takes no pleasure in attempts to give an outward appearance of purity when there is no true striving after purity.
 4. While we should strive to be faithful witnesses and godly examples in how we conduct ourselves before others, we must never think that we can establish our own righteousness by getting other people to see us as righteous.
 5. We always need to remember that God looks beyond outward appearances and sees the heart.
 6. This is a terrifying prospect for those who are apart from Christ.
 7. But if we are in Christ, our hearts have been cleansed by faith and we have the certain hope of one day being perfectly conformed to the likeness of our righteous Savior. (see Acts 15:9; 1 Jn. 3:2)
 8. And as the apostle John says in his first epistle, “everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” (1 Jn. 3:3)
 9. This is the purity that Jesus is calling for in this passage.
 10. True purity is not an outward facade.
 11. True purity is the outward expression of a renewed heart.
- C. After making this distinction between true cleansing and cleansing that is merely outward, Jesus proceeds to pronounce three woes on the Pharisees.

1. In the Bible, the term “woe” is used to introduce a pronouncement of judgment.
 2. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they, the ones who were regarded as the most upright men in all Israel, will fall under God’s judgment unless they turn from their ways.
 3. These three woes continue to address aspects of the Pharisees’ intense focus on external matters while neglecting the weightier matters of the law.
 4. First, Jesus deals with their meticulousness about tithing.
 5. They were so careful to make sure that they gave a tenth of all their earnings that they even went so far as to tithe on the herbs that they grew in their gardens.
 6. Notice that Jesus does not say that it was wrong for them to do this.
 7. He does not abrogate tithing here.
 8. What he does is point out the tragic fact that they were so scrupulous about small matters while neglecting the primary focus of the law.
 9. The sum of God’s law is dealing with others in fairness and love and loving God with our whole being.
 10. We need to be mindful of how easy it is to major on what is minor and to neglect what is most important.
- D. Another way in which the Pharisees’ externalism was manifested was in their love of recognition.
1. They thrived on being held in high esteem by others.
 2. They loved being given the best seats in the synagogue and having people extend deferential greetings to them in the marketplaces.

3. The problem with this kind of attitude is that it feeds pride.
 4. It causes people to think that their ability to get other people to hold them in high regard translates to their relationship with God, and this is simply not true.
 5. As the Scripture says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6 ESV)
- E. The last woe that Jesus pronounces on the Pharisees returns to the subject of ceremonial purity, with Jesus referring to them as unmarked graves.
1. The Jews whitewashed their graves in order to ensure that people did not accidentally come into contact with them.
 2. They did this because anyone who touched a grave would be made ceremonially unclean for seven days.
 3. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that, in spite of all of their focus on ceremonial purity, they are actually causing people to contract uncleanness.
 4. Those who follow their teachings, those who think that God is pleased with piety that is merely external, are cut off from God's presence.

III. Laying Burdens on Others

- A. After hearing Jesus direct these woes to the Pharisees, one of the lawyers (or scribes) who was present at the dinner pointed out that the things Jesus was saying were also offensive to him and his fellow scribes.
1. The scribes interpreted the Mosaic law and assisted the Pharisees in their study of the Jewish traditions.
 2. Because of this, any criticism directed at the Pharisees would be felt by the scribes as well.

3. Upon having this pointed out to him, Jesus responds by turning his sights on the scribes and pronouncing a series of woes on them.
 4. He begins by saying, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers."
 5. The teachers of the law made life unbearably difficult for people because they added man-made traditions to the law.
 6. One of the areas where this was especially evident was in all of the rules that they created in connection with the Sabbath command.
 7. They had rules for how much weight a person could lift and how far he could travel, rules about tying and loosening knots, rules for how to rescue people from a collapsed building without doing any unnecessary work, rules for how to handle your bath towel without accidentally doing the work of wringing water out of it.
 8. They treated the law this way because they believed that if the Jewish people could just be more meticulous in their observance of God's law, then God would respond by establishing his end-time kingdom in their midst.
 9. In other words, they viewed the law as the means to obtain God's blessing.
 10. Whenever the law is treated that way, it becomes an unbearable burden because no one is capable of perfectly keeping God's law.
- B. I want to skip down now to the final woe that Jesus pronounces on the lawyers in verse 52.
1. We will return to what he says in the verses before that in just a moment.
 2. In verse 52 Jesus says, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you

hindered those who were entering.”

3. The point here is that the lawyers’ way of handling God’s law shut people out of God’s kingdom.
4. They were the ones who were supposed to instruct people in God’s revelation, but they took away the key that unlocks its meaning.
5. By making salvation into a matter of law-keeping, they prevented people from seeing that the true way of salvation is to trust in God’s gracious promises.
6. Their legalism prevented them from receiving God’s promises, and because they themselves were teachers they became a hindrance to others.

IV. Opposing God’s True Messengers

- A. The last thing that this passage teaches us about religious hypocrisy is that it opposes the true messengers of God.
 1. Jesus uses the attention that the scribes gave to building and maintaining the tombs of the prophets to point out that they are no different than earlier generations of Israelites who opposed and persecuted the prophets.
 2. The reason why Jesus can say this is that they did not heed the message that was proclaimed by those prophets.
 3. The book of Isaiah begins with the Lord condemning the very same externalism that characterized the piety of the scribes and Pharisees, saying, “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations — I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.” (Isa 1:12–14 ESV)

4. Like the Israelites in Isaiah's day, the scribes and Pharisees did not see that it was their hearts that needed cleansing, and as a result they kept placing their confidence in their outward acts of piety.
 5. They were doing the very thing that the prophets confronted, yet they were meticulous about memorializing the prophets.
 6. They were like people today who claim Jesus as their example and guide but who turn a deaf ear to the parts of his teaching that they find objectionable.
 7. In doing this, they prove that if they had been alive back in the first century, they would have joined others in calling for Jesus to be crucified.
 8. Hypocrites always oppose those who testify to God's truth, because such testimony exposes their own sin.
- B. Jesus warns that those who set themselves against God's messengers will be held accountable.
1. He says that the blood of all the prophets shed from the foundation of the world will be charged against the scribes' generation.
 2. They will even be held responsible for the blood of Abel, whose death is recorded all the way back in the fourth chapter of Genesis.
 3. One reason why Jesus can say this is because those who reject those who bear testimony to God's truth are really rejecting God.
 4. Another reason Jesus can say this is because God dearly loves every one of his children.
 5. As it says in Psalm 116, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."
 6. The blood of the martyrs is always in God's remembrance.

7. In the words of J.C. Ryle, "Every tear that the wicked have caused the godly to shed shall be reckoned for. Every drop of righteous blood that has been spilled shall at length be required."
- C. After Jesus says these things, we see the scribes and Pharisees doing exactly what Jesus rebuked them for doing.
1. They pressed him hard with all sorts of questions, not because they were genuinely interested in his answers, but because they wanted to trip him up and find something that they could use against him.
 2. Instead of turning from their sin, they resolved to do away with Jesus.
 3. This is what happens when people think that their outward acts of piety or their good intentions can secure a right standing with God.
 4. If you do not see your need for inward cleansing, you will never come to Jesus.
 5. And if you will not come to Jesus, you will, in one way or another, set your self against Jesus.
 6. So let us always be careful to heed these words from the epistle of James: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:8-10 ESV)