

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Hypocrisy in the Church”**

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*“Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).*

Uncle Richard and I met again out at the farm last weekend and went for a slow walk through the woods. To have an elderly uncle in your life, one whom you love and learn from, a good listener with lots of hard earned wisdom and a great sense of humor . . . what an unexpected blessing! While we walk, our conversations drift about; it’s all fair-game. Uncle Richard just returned from his granddaughter’s wedding reception; the wedding itself was held in a courthouse. His granddaughter is an intelligent, attractive young woman who was raised in the church and went to one of our LCMS schools. Somewhere along the way, however, she decided she no longer wanted anything to do with the church, though she still professes a deep faith in Christ. She’s not just indifferent toward the church; no, there’s an edge there. Recently she said to her grandmother, “The church is just *full* of hypocrites.” We’ve all heard it before. It’s a familiar charge, and, as we’ll see, not altogether untrue. But how do we respond to it?

The term hypocrite comes from the world of theater in ancient Greece, and it referred to those masks actors used to dramatize certain roles. In antiquity, actors would often play multiple characters and would indicate their role by holding a mask in front of their face. So a hypocrite is one person on the surface, and quite another underneath the surface. With time, the word hypocrite referred to someone who himself does not practice what he says. In any event, it seems hypocrisy is eating the church alive. Seventy-two percent of people who don’t go to church say that one of the reasons is because of the hypocrisy. That is, when you and I act hypocritically, we give people a flimsy reason to reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus once said to his followers, “You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:14ff). Apparently, we’re not doing a very good job of that, because the exact opposite seems to be happening. People are not seeing our good works and glorifying God. They’re seeing our hypocrisy and dropping out of the church, or not joining it in the first place.

Part of the problem is the yardstick by which the world measures us. We claim to be followers of Jesus, the one who is perfect. And so the expectation is Christians should at least *resemble* Christ. When we don’t, people notice. “And you call yourself a Christian!” they say. Can you hear it? When people know you are a Christian, you have a bull’s eye on your back. You are a walking target for this charge of hypocrisy. And every one of us (myself included) has done something to contribute to the charge of hypocrisy. Perhaps, then, first response to the person who charges the church with hypocrisy is to say, “You know, you’re right. There is hypocrisy in the church and I too have been hypocritical. I’ve not always lived up to the commands of God.” We can say this because it’s the truth. I like Paul’s attitude. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15). As Christians, we

don't need to fear confessing sin and guilt, in part because it's the truth and in part because we know there is forgiveness in Christ.

But I think it's also important to point out there is a difference between sinners and hypocrites. Often, those two words are used interchangeably and that's not right. The Bible says all people sin and have fallen short of the glory of God. So the church is full of sinners because the world is full of sinners. In fact the church is the one place in the world that in order to become a member, you have to first acknowledge and confess you are indeed a poor, miserable sinner. The church can stomach liars and thieves and murderers and addicts but we cannot stomach anyone who claims to be without sin. That one doesn't belong. We don't want that one here. This place is for sinners. In fact, we even claim we deserve God's present and eternal punishment. With this in mind, it's fair to say the church is full of sinners. (Every place is.) But it's not really fair to say the church is full of hypocrites because we're not claiming to be anything but sinners. In addition, there are murderers in prison, but not all who are in prison are murderers. There are hypocrites in church, but not all in church are hypocrites.

Anyway, since when do people allow hypocrisy to determine their affiliation and participation? Since there are hypocrites in Wisconsin, would you move to Illinois to try to avoid hypocrites? Some doctors are quacks. Does that mean you never see a doctor anymore? Ground beef is sometimes contaminated with E. coli – but has everyone stopped eating burgers? There are hypocrites among God's people. There are tares among the wheat. But you still want to be with and among God's people.

For some, saying the church is full of hypocrites can be an unconscious cop-out. It justifies non-involvement. So long as the church is full of hypocrites, then I don't have to set the alarm clock for Sunday morning. I don't have to attend any messy board meetings on Monday nights. I don't have to give away my hard-earned money, or volunteer in the community or serve the poor, or build houses in Mexico. All the good things Christians do are recklessly swept away with the charge that they're all hypocrites. And all the things you don't want to do yourself, you don't have to anymore, because the church is just full of hypocrites.

Attacking hypocrites can also be a way to quiet one's own conscience. That is, one way to make yourself feel better about yourself is by tearing down others. In this way, everyone loves a hypocrite, and the more grievous the examples, the better, because then we can use them to excuse our smaller transgressions and assuage our own guilt. We build up a Hypocrites Hall of Shame and say, "I may have my faults but at least I'm not as bad as that guy over there!"

I think it's important to remember that on Judgment Day, God is not going to grade on a curve. It's nice to point to hypocrites in this life for excuses, but don't think for a moment it's going to improve your chances on the Last Day. God is not going to say, "Well, you're bad . . . but because you're not as bad as those goats over there, welcome to my Father's house!" Besides, one of the most fundamental teachings of Christ is that we should take our eyes off the sin of others, and concentrate on our own chronic need for forgiveness. In Matthew 7, Jesus said, "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. 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" (v.3)? Whoever we are, we need God's grace and forgiveness today and we're going to need it on the Last Day. And God promises to deliver that grace and forgiveness is in his church, more specifically in His

Word and Sacraments. You don't want to cut yourself off from that. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire" (Jn. 15:5ff).

People say, "I trust and believe in Jesus; I just don't need the church." The thing is, Jesus seems to think you do need the church. You said you trust him. Do you trust him also on that? Jesus kept the Sabbath and commanded us to do so. In the parable he taught that it is impossible to be a member of his flock in isolation. He taught the lamb that separates itself from the flock is called "lost". To desert the flock is to be alone in the wilderness where the lamb almost certainly perishes. When the shepherd finds the one who is lost, what does he do? He brings it back and restores it to the flock because that's where it needs to be.

The Bible says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Could it also be that all are hypocrites? A hypocrite is someone who does not practice what he preaches. Just about everyone on the planet would say cheating on your spouse is wrong. But Jesus taught that if you even look at another lustfully, you've committed adultery in your heart. So you say one thing and yet you do another. That's called hypocrisy.

Just about everyone on earth would say murder is wrong. Yet the Bible teaches that hatred is a form of murder, and who of us hasn't felt a surge of hatred at one point or another? You say one thing and do another. That's hypocrisy. We could do that with every one of the commandments of God. Anyone who lifts up a standard of ethics and then doesn't live according to it is a hypocrite. And that net catches just about everyone.

For example, many believe it's important to reduce their carbon footprint. And so we set for ourselves some green standards of living. We reduce, reuse, recycle. We feel good about ourselves and maybe even a little self-righteous when we drive a small car and buy local and organic and live simply and use mass transportation. But then, a big anniversary comes up and to celebrate we fly a long ways away on a big, fuel thirst jet. (Maybe we tell ourselves we've built up some moral points in the bank, some carbon credits, and can afford to indulge ourselves.) Or to enjoy nature we drive our small car all the way to Devil's Lake, or the Bad Lands or Yellowstone. Or to celebrate the New Year we uncork a bottle of wine or Champaign shipped all the way from France. I'm not saying it's wrong. It's just not living up to our standard of being green. So in one way or another, we're all hypocrites. There's no avoiding it. Therefore, it is also hypocritical to point at the church and say, "It's full of hypocrites."

No one can escape the charge of "hypocrite" – no one except Jesus. And the Good News is Christianity does not stand or fall on the way Christians have acted throughout history or are acting today. Christianity stands or falls on the person of Jesus, and he was neither sinner nor hypocrite. Absolutely pure and innocent, that Lamb of God went to the cross for us. We are saved by Christ's performance on the cross, not by the performance of Christians in the church. Even large-scale hypocrisy (the Crusades come to mind) do not invalidate Christianity or Christ's redeeming death. We worship the perfect Christ, not imperfect Christians.

Ruth Bell Graham (wife of Billy Graham) was once confronted by a young college student from India. He said, "I would like to believe in Christ. We of India would like to believe in Christ. But we have never seen a Christian who was like Christ." Ruth Graham answered, "I am not offering you Christians. I am offering you Christ."

Christians are sinners, and when we fail to live up to our calling, we might be tempted to pretend that we haven't failed. When we do that, we put on the mask of a hypocrite and come under the judgment of God. We need to rush back to the cross. We need to flee to our Savior. In Him we find not a mask that conceals just our face, but an entire cloak which covers over our sin with his righteousness. If on the Last Day we are to stand before Almighty God, our only hope will be in the righteousness given us by Christ. And he has promised, "All of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27).

So the church is a good place for hypocrites. It's a good place for liars too, and thieves and adulterers and murderers and misfits. Jesus said, "It's not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick" (Mk. 2:17). It's not the self-righteous who need the church. It's sinners. Paul wrote, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24).

Can you hear it? "The church is just full of hypocrites!" Maybe so. But we're always glad to move over and make room for one more. Amen.