Hypocrisy?

"So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:28, ESV)

"I don't go to church. Churches are full of hypocrites."

Perhaps you have heard that before. Perhaps you have even said it. Jesus certainly had little patience with hypocrisy. Some of His strongest words were directed toward the scribes and Pharisees. He called them hypocrites repeatedly. He described them as whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but filled with death within.

But what exactly is hypocrisy?

It cannot simply mean failing to live consistently with what we believe. If that were hypocrisy, every Christian would be a hypocrite every time he sinned. Christians believe they should love their neighbors, control their tongues, forgive others, resist temptation, and obey God. Yet Christians fail at all of those things.

The Christian who sins and says, "I sinned. I was wrong. I need to repent," is not necessarily being hypocritical. He is acknowledging that his conduct failed to conform to what he believes.

Hypocrisy is different. It involves pretense. It is presenting ourselves as something we know we are not. It is allowing an outward appearance to conceal an inward reality.

That is why Jesus' picture of the whitewashed tomb was so powerful. The outside presented one thing; the inside contained another. The Pharisees cultivated the appearance of righteousness. Jesus said, *"They preach, but do not practice."* (Matthew 23:3, ESV) Their religion had become a performance before others.

And religious people are not the only people capable of that.

A businessman may carefully cultivate a reputation for integrity while behaving dishonestly in private. A parent may demand behavior from his children that he excuses in himself. Someone may publicly advocate virtues that are conspicuously absent from his private life. Hypocrisy is not peculiar to the church. It is a temptation of the human heart.

Perhaps one reason it is so easy is that we want to save face.

We want people to think well of us. Once they have formed a favorable impression, we may be reluctant to correct it. Eventually, we may begin protecting the image. We do not necessarily have to tell an outright lie. We simply allow others to continue believing something about us that we know is not true.

Religious hypocrisy can work the same way. We want others to think we are spiritually mature. Our prayer life is strong. Our marriage is wonderful. Our faith never wavers. We understand the Bible. We have everything together.

So we carefully show what supports the picture and conceal what does not.

There is nothing hypocritical about privacy. No one is obligated to disclose every weakness, struggle, or sin to everyone. But privacy becomes something else when concealment becomes pretense and we deliberately maintain a false appearance of righteousness.

Even genuine believers can fall into this. Peter did. When certain men came from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew from eating with Gentile believers because he feared what others would think. Paul says that other Jews *"acted hypocritically along with him."* (Galatians 2:13, ESV)

Peter was not therefore a false apostle. He was a genuine believer who acted hypocritically.

Perhaps that should make us cautious about pointing toward the church and asking, "Are there hypocrites in there?"

Of course there are.

There are sinners in there.

The more searching question is whether there is hypocrisy in me.

Am I more concerned that others think I am holy than I am with actually being holy? Am I protecting an image rather than confessing the truth?

Sometimes three simple words can demolish a beautifully whitewashed wall:

"I was wrong."

And sometimes three more:

"I have sinned."

Just a thought.

John L. Wheeler

© 2026 John L. Wheeler / Joshua House Books, LLC. All rights reserved.