

Going To Hell With Hypocrites

More than one fainthearted disciple has been heard to attribute his own backsliding to exasperation with all the hypocrites in the church. Perhaps they are emboldened to forsake Christ's church by an excessive interpretation of Psalm 26:4: *"I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites."* Applied consistently, however, that sentiment would remove one not only from the church, but also football games, movie theaters, and maybe even the living room sofa. Surely the sweet psalmist of Israel was not encouraging apostasy as a solution to hypocrisy.

The church, like every other institution on Earth, has its share of hypocrites or "stage players" of a religious sort whose Sunday best is but a costume and disguise, a device by which they fool themselves and hope to deceive both God and man (Titus 1:16; Hebrews 4:11-13).

They nod approvingly when the preacher rails against gossip, but bite and devour one another as soon as the last amen fades. They sing of love and mercy, but live according to self and greed. They commend the scriptures and sermons that expose the faults of their neighbors, but turn a deaf ear to any evidence against their own (Matthew 13:14-15; James 2:9-11). Some hypocrites even privately practice that which they publicly oppose. They *"boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law"* and discredit God in the process (Romans 2:23).

Hypocrites in the church? Absolutely. Some even suggest that there are nothing but hypocrites in the church, but that's an exaggeration. Surely, there are nothing but sinners in the church, but not every sinner is a hypocrite. Some of those whom you are labeling as hypocrites are really just strugglers -- like you -- who are doing their best to do right, but who are falling short in highly regrettable, occasionally public, ways. Instead of extending mercy, you would condemn them by calling them hypocrites. They're not. They're flawed, like you. Except they do not write you off as a willful, irreparable mess.

They're trying. Maybe not hard enough to satisfy you, but they are trying. Rather than exhort them, you have become a speck inspector, a judge with evil intentions, shifting accountability for your own weakness onto another whose burden is already great (Matthew 7:1-5; Galatians 6:1-5).

No one spent more time exposing religious hypocrisy than Jesus. As the flawless Son of God, He was better qualified than you are. What did He see? In the sermon on the mount, He identified those who used worship and discipleship as a vehicle for their pride rather than any real piety. They announced their almsgiving with a trumpet, translated their prayers into

speeches and exaggerated the ill-effects of fasting to elicit pity and admiration (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16).

Hypocrites feign curiosity about the gospel, secretly preferring their own interpretations of God's will (Matthew 15:7-9; 22:18). Their self-righteousness sickens those who might have been saved by a more earnest example (Matthew 23:13-15). "*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy,*" Jesus warned (Luke 12:1). They major in minors and flunk every divine examination (Matthew 23:23-29), binding heavy burdens upon others while excusing themselves (Matthew 23:2-4).

And so, a member of Christ's body judges the actions of those around him to be hypocrisy. Maybe that's right. While unintentional sin can hardly be described as hypocritical, the more willful variety just might be (1 John 3:4-10). There was even one occasion in which the apostle Peter smeared his convictions. "*And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy*" (Galatians 2:13). The careful reader will note that Paul condemned his behavior and rebuked him to the face. He did not, however, abandon him. Or the church.

Frankly, the "disgusted with hypocrites" explanation for forsaking the church is naught but a smokescreen. It is the fainthearted pot commenting unfavorably upon the blackness of yonder kettle. Nothing is more self-servingly hypocritical than to excuse your apostasy by blaming the struggles of someone else (cf. Genesis 3:12; Exodus 32:22; 1 Samuel 13:11).

No one really leaves the church because of the hypocrisy of someone else. People leave the church because of their own hypocrisy. Otherwise, they would not take out their frustrations on the only true innocent – Christ who died to redeem them all (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Consider also the bitter irony of a decision to forsake Christ's church just to avoid proximity to hypocrites. One might successfully avoid them for a lifetime, but then spend all of eternity imprisoned right beside them (Hebrews 10:23-31).

Some of your brethren are hypocrites. Others are simply ignorant, weak, fainthearted, or struggling to get it together (1 Thessalonians 5:14). If you contemplate quitting on Christ or His church, you are one of them. "*So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander*" (1 Peter 2:1).

Adapted From Jeff S. Smith