

August 22, 2021 – Mark 7:1-13

Several years ago, the Barna Research Group completed a five year study on young Christians in American. 18-29 year olds who were active church goers in their youth, but have since fallen away from regular attendance. And they found lots of reasons why young people stop going to church.

There's the typical ones. Church is boring. Church is judgmental. Church is backwards. The things that Christianity is often accused of. But there were some important additions to the mix. Things like “the church ignores real world problems,” “God and the Bible are missing from the church,” “the church is a country club, only for insiders,” and “the church doesn't want to answer my questions.”

The study painted a picture of a generation that doesn't trust Christians. It's not that they don't trust the Bible or that they don't trust Christ. Only 23% said that they had stopped attending church because they doubted their faith. Less than a quarter of them. The other 77% left because they didn't trust other Christians.

We have a word for when a group of people should be one thing, but they look like something completely different: hypocrite. And Jesus talks a lot about hypocrisy. The term only appears once in the Old Testament, it doesn't come up at all in the Epistles, but Jesus accuses people of hypocrisy no less than 17 times in the Gospels. It's his #1 accusation.

And we heard one of those usages in our Gospel lesson today. He says, *“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”*

Sounds familiar. These people say all the right things, but they don't deal with real world problems. They claim to be following God's Word, but God and His Word are missing from their worship. They claim to put the commands of God first, but really all they want is a country club full of insiders who know the rules they've invented. They put on a good show, but they're lying to everyone around them.

Simply put, the world today is leveling the exact same accusations against our church that Jesus leveled against His church. Which, interestingly, were the same accusations that Isaiah leveled against his church. 700 years between Isaiah and Jesus. 2000 years between Jesus and us. And nothing has changed. We, the people of God, are the same hypocrites we've always been.

So what's the solution? Is there a solution? If this has been going on for, literally, thousands of years, is there really any hope that we'll break the cycle? Well, yes and no.

Because there will always be sin and there will always be sinners. There will always be people who want to look better than everyone else, even though they're not. Which means there will always be hypocrisy among God's people.

So if you're looking for a church in which hypocrisy doesn't exist, I'm sorry, but you're not going to find it. If you're looking for any group of sinful human beings where hypocrisy doesn't exist, I'm sorry, but you're not going to find it. Hypocrisy goes hand in hand with sin. And sin is everywhere.

But that doesn't mean there isn't an answer. You see, there's a tension that goes on in every church. The tension between what happens on the outside and what happens on the inside. On the outside, we want to look like God's people. We want to say and do all the right things. We want to have worship that is pleasing to God. We want to encourage activities that are righteous and holy. And we want to show the world that we have given God the very top priority in our church and in our lives.

And that would be a good thing. But the problem is that the more we concern ourselves with what's on the outside, the less we concern ourselves with what's on the inside. And goodness doesn't start on the outside and work its way in. It starts on the inside and works its way out. And if there is no goodness on the inside, there will never be goodness on the outside.

No matter how hard we try to worship. No matter what wholesome activities we create. No matter what we think our priorities are. Everything on the outside becomes dirty and unclean because the inside is corrupt.

And the world sees it. They see a church that is so blinded by its own sinfulness that it can't even see how dirty it is on both the inside and the outside. And so they call us hypocrites. And we try harder to clean up the outside. And they call us bigger hypocrites. And we try even harder to clean up the outside. And they call us even bigger hypocrites.

And they're right. Because the solution to hypocrisy doesn't come from the outside. It comes from the inside. It comes from opening up your heart. To God. To your brothers and sisters in Christ. To the world around you. Opening up the inside and admitting, "I'm dirty, inside and out. I can't make myself clean. And I'm sorry for being a hypocrite."

I'm sorry for saying I'm a Christian and then not acting like it. I'm sorry for claiming to love God, and then not loving Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I'm sorry for claiming to love my neighbor, and then not loving him as I love myself. I'm a hypocrite. And I know it. And there's nothing I can do about it.

The cure for hypocrisy is admitting that you're a hypocrite. Because the moment that you admit that you're a hypocrite is the moment that you stop being one. It is the moment that you stop lying to God and yourself and the world around you. And like the tax collector in the Temple, you bow your head and say, "God, be merciful to me. For I am a sinner."

Jesus spent a lot of time chastising the Pharisees for being hypocrites. And he was right. They were hypocrites. Just as the Israelites were hypocrites in the time of Isaiah. Just as we are hypocrites today.

And yet, Jesus didn't come to condemn his people for hypocrisy. He convicts us of our hypocrisy, absolutely. He identifies our sins. Calls us out on our false-righteousness. Criticizes us for our failures. He shines the spotlight of God's Law on us until we see in perfect detail every single sinful thing we've ever done. But he doesn't condemn us. No, he washes us.

That's what St Paul tells us today. Jesus doesn't treat his church as a defective pot to be broken and cast into the fire. No, he treats us as his bride. As the one he loves. As the one he wants to see made perfect.

He loves his church. He gave himself up for his church. Despite all of our sinfulness and hypocrisy. And he sanctifies his church. He makes his church holy.

How? By cleansing us through the washing of water with the Word. By cleansing us through Holy Baptism. And when we pass through that water, we don't just become outwardly clean. We become inwardly clean.

We are remade in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. We become holy, without blemish. Just as he is holy and without blemish.

For all that Jesus chastised the Pharisees for being hypocrites, He wasn't there to condemn the world for its uncleanness. He wasn't there to send the world to hell for its sinfulness. He was there to say, "Yes, you're a sinner. But I'm here to forgive you. I'm here to show you grace. I'm here to clean you of your sin."

You wash and you wash and you wash, and you only get dirtier. Because you only clean the outside. But Christ came to clean you on the inside. Christ came to make everything right, on the inside and the outside. That we might be the church He wants us to be.

Not a perfect church for perfect people. But an imperfect church for imperfect people. With a perfect God and Savior. Who gives us his perfection. Who clothes us with his righteousness.

The world looks at us and sees hypocrites. And they're right. And that's a problem. They shouldn't see hypocrites. They should see sinners. Pointing the way to a God who forgives. Amen.