

## **HYPOCRISY**

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
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Have you heard the one about the woman who called on the Presbyterian minister in town and asked him if he'd officiate at a funeral for her dog who had just died? "Oh, I can't do that, ma'am," he said. "Why don't you try the Baptist minister?" "All right," she said, "but can you give me some advice? How much should I pay him – five hundred dollars or a thousand?" "Hold on here," he said, "I didn't realize your dog was a Presbyterian."<sup>i</sup>

Hypocrisy is an age-old moral failing, that often has to do with greed, and it can be particularly egregious among religious leaders. "Beware of the scribes," Jesus teaches in today's gospel lesson, "who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces...They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."<sup>ii</sup> The word "Hypocrisy" comes from the Greek, and it technically means playing a part on the stage. It usually refers to a false appearance of

virtue<sup>iii</sup> – not practicing what you preach. Therefore, it's a particularly common failure among preachers, like me. It's also one of the main reasons cited by people for leaving institutional religion: "Those church people claim to be so good and pious, but in reality they're just the opposite. I can't stand being around hypocrites like that." Such criticism is often well deserved.

For example, you've probably heard that the Rev. Ted Haggard, megachurch pastor in Colorado Springs, advisor to the White House and congressional leaders, and President of the National Evangelical Association, which represents 30 million Christians in America, resigned a week ago after confessing to sexual immorality, deceit and lying. He was well known for condemning homosexuality, but a male prostitute with whom Haggard had a drug-infused relationship blew the whistle on him. The final straw apparently came when Mike Jones of Denver discovered that a sexual partner of his, who had been using a false name, was in fact the Rev. Haggard, when Haggard had been actively engaged in opposing same-sex marriage Colorado in the run-up to last

Tuesday's election. As Jones put it, "I am sad for him and his family...My intent was never to destroy his family. My intent was to expose a hypocrite."<sup>iv</sup>

Hypocrisy as often seems to have to do with sexual deceit as with greed. We're well aware of certain Catholic priests having preached a message from the pulpit that belied their sexual abuse of children in their churches. Powerful televangelists like the Revs. Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker preached ultraconservative messages about sexual behavior while engaging in extramarital sex themselves. Baptist president Bill Clinton had sex with Monica Lewinsky and then lied about it on television and under oath.<sup>v</sup>

Although Christianity is known for its emphasis on mercy and forgiveness, Jesus was at the height of his rhetorical power when condemning hypocrisy. Matthew has Jesus thundering, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence...Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and

all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”<sup>vi</sup> Luke reports Jesus as having asked: "How can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your neighbor's eye.”<sup>vii</sup>

So how should we deal with hypocrisy, starting with ourselves? The easiest answer, I suppose, is “Just don't do it. Don't be a hypocrite.” But it's not quite that easy. We're human, after all, and we don't always practice what we preach. Then, there are some matters which are complicated enough that we have to make tradeoffs or compromises that appear to be hypocritical. So, I have four suggestions: 1) Avoid absolutism, because it will inevitably get you into trouble. 2) Be as transparent as possible about your beliefs and actions, so you don't appear to be claiming one thing while actually doing something else. 3) Practice humility as a virtue. 4) Be especially

careful in the high-risk areas of money, sex and power. Let me add some detail to each of these four areas.

Taking an absolute stance, like “Thou shalt never lie,” can often create greater ethical problems than taking a conditional one, since we often have conflicting moral duties to negotiate. If the Gestapo come to your door in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam in 1942 and ask if Anne Frank and her Jewish family are hiding in your attic, hopefully you won’t be absolutist about truth telling. For you have other competing moral duties, like doing no harm, protecting the weak and vulnerable, and pursuing justice. Are you a hypocrite if you claim to value truth-telling and then lie to the Gestapo?

There’s a business ethics book, which I like a lot, by a Harvard professor named Joseph Badaracco. It’s entitled, *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right*.<sup>viii</sup> White collar crime is something to avoid, surely, but many of the problems that thoughtful, ethically-sensitive business managers face on a daily basis are not a matter of right versus wrong, but involve conflicting moral duties owed to many different stakeholders. Those stakeholders include the owners of the company,

customers, employees, the local community, suppliers and distributors, among others.

And then there are charitable considerations that a manager might have, earning the respect of one's own friends, supporting one's family, and maintaining one's own personal integrity. The goal is to juggle all of one's responsibilities and aspirations successfully as a business manager. True character requires rolling up one's sleeves and getting one's hands dirty, rather than seeking moral purity in some kind of absolutist position.

Absolutism in religion is particularly pernicious. It leads to idolatry – treating as ultimately important certain matters that simply are not, because they are not themselves God -- like particular rituals, dogmas, institutions and rules. Even if one is strongly opposed to abortion, for example, the risk of absolutism is that victims of rape and incest may not be fully attended to. Nor may serious risks to the health or life of the mother be properly considered. Trying to practice what one preaches based on an absolute principle, then, naturally invites charges of hypocrisy, when in fact one may have made the very best moral decision possible under the particular circumstances.

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously quipped that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.”<sup>ix</sup> So, if we each avoid absolutism, we’ll have fewer problems with hypocrisy.

Then we need to be transparent about our inconsistencies and conflicting duties.

This is especially hard to do with our children, both because we’re trying to teach them basic duties and also because they don’t yet have the sophistication to understand how to negotiate and prioritize conflicting duties. Hence, in my experience, charges of hypocrisy are most often heard from the young directed at the old – by children (especially teenagers) against their parents, and by students against their teachers. That may also be due to their catching us in our normal human failings, which I’ll discuss more in a moment under the topic of humility.

A simple example of apparent hypocrisy and attempted transparency can be seen in a statement in our order of service. Ever since Jane and Leland Stanford founded this university, there has been a basic commitment here to coeducation and gender equality. You can see it in this church, where all the high clerestory stained

glass windows, whether representing Hebrew prophets or Christian saints, alternate male and female images. Gender inclusiveness is an integral part of the mission of Stanford University and of its Memorial Church. On the last page of our announcements in the order of service, you will see a statement that “The Office for Religious Life is committed to the use of inclusive language in university worship services to the extent possible. Occasionally, for purposes of historical accuracy, anthems may necessitate that this commitment be suspended.”

Are we being hypocritical, then, by claiming to be committed to gender inclusiveness, but then having certain music sung in the church that uses terms like “man” for human beings and “he” for God? An introduction to the Bible that we use for our readings, the *New Revised Standard Version*, provides some pertinent observations. It notes that this new translation was specifically designed to be as inclusive as possible in the sense that “it avoids language that might inappropriately suggest limits of gender.” Yet it also explains that the Bible is “an ancient book” that was “formed and written in cultures distant from our own not only in time and space but



also in character. Indeed, what is required of us as readers is rather to enter, through these texts, into another world of meaning. Only when we have sensed the peculiarity and integrity of that other world can we build a bridge of understanding between it and our own.”<sup>x</sup> These sentiments represent an important part of what we mean by the reference to historical accuracy in the statement in our order of service. There is also the consideration that certain older, familiar language in our music speaks to many of our congregants directly, without the distraction of having to deal with changes in well-known texts.

The other side of this, though, is expressed in the preface to one of the hymnals from which we regularly copy hymns for our order of service. Because male gender limitations can actually grate on the ears of many of our current congregants, applying gender inclusive insights to old familiar hymns significantly enhances the worship experience for those people. It insures that our religious tradition “is not merely received,” but lived in a contemporary way that engages those worshippers’ minds and hearts.<sup>xi</sup> So, we have struck a kind of compromise in our church music that may seem

hypocritical, that may not be satisfactory to all, but that is our best current attempt both to fulfill the founding values of this university and church and also to respond to the diverse needs and desires of our current congregation and musicians for a spiritually fulfilling experience at Memorial Church, with roots in millennia of worshipping history, but also with wings that carry us affirmatively into the present and on into the future.<sup>xii</sup> Transparency, then, can at least take the edge off perceived hypocrisy.

The next antidote to hypocrisy lies in the practice of humility. The scribes that Jesus refers to in today's gospel lesson "like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. " They want "to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets."<sup>xiii</sup> They are not working very hard on the virtue of humility. And they're setting themselves up for a hard fall, when their pious declarations are found not to square with their self-interested actions. Televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker were not known for their humility either. Jim Bakker built a vast broadcasting and theme park empire, but ended up in prison on fraud, tax evasion, and racketeering charges.<sup>xiv</sup> Jimmy Swaggart made a career of denouncing

and reviling others, including being unremittingly anti-Catholic, before he was brought down by patronizing prostitutes.<sup>xv</sup>

Jesus taught, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”<sup>xvi</sup> When a woman who was caught in adultery was brought to him, and the religious authorities asked him about the Mosaic law requiring that she be stoned to death, Jesus responded, “Let the one among you who is without sin throw the first stone.”<sup>xvii</sup> “Blessed are the meek,” he also proclaimed, “for they will inherit the earth.”<sup>xviii</sup>

In what may seem like an insignificant way, I’ve found this matter of hypocrisy and humility to be quite poignant in my dealings with my own children over the years. They seemed forever to be finding out more about their father’s imperfections as they grew older, and the disappointment in their eyes always showed. Take a small matter like swearing, which we clergy are not supposed to indulge in. As various words or phrases would periodically slip through my teeth in frustration, anger, or pain, I found my authority in this area to be fading. Somehow, “Do as I say, not as I do,” didn’t seem to hold up. My stated claim was that there was never a reason to swear, because there

were always more colorful and more effective words and phrases to use. Swearing was lazy, in effect, as I explained, besides being obscene or blasphemous. But somehow Reverend McLennan kept being heard doing it around his children from time to time.

So I came to change my tune, I think in the direction of humility: “Boys, your father isn’t perfect. None of us are. I try my best, but that isn’t always good enough. We should all try our best in areas like swearing, but we’re not always going to succeed.” Luckily, that didn’t seem to induce a torrent of profanity in turn from my children, which might well have been the result of prideful rigidity coupled with the hypocrisy of what clearly could flow from my own mouth. So, some version of humility gets added to my list.

Finally, there’s the importance of recognizing how dramatically the risks of hypocrisy increase in the context of money, sex and power. Jim Bakker seeks contributions for a Christian ministry from his twelve million viewers, and then personally pockets over \$4 million of it a year.<sup>xix</sup> Ted Haggerty condemns homosexuality and works against gay rights, while at the same time secretly having sex with a male

prostitute. The scribes demand respect and honor in the marketplaces and synagogues, and then oppress the poor around them – devouring widows’ houses. In today’s reading of Psalm 146, we are told not to put our trust in princes, but instead in God -- who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, watches over strangers, and upholds the orphan and the widow.<sup>xx</sup> Jesus tells us that it’s harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.<sup>xxi</sup>

So, I leave you with these four antidotes to hypocrisy: 1) Avoid absolutism. 2) Be as transparent as possible. 3) Practice the virtue of humility. 4) Be especially on guard in the areas of money, sex and power. Then, let’s find the good exemplars and models out there and work hard to emulate them.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Adapted from Guy Wesley, "Forget to Ask" in Loyal Jones (ed.), *The Preacher Joke Book* (Little Rock, Arkansas: August House, 1989), p. 33.
- <sup>ii</sup> Mark 12: 38, 40.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: 1997), p. 571.
- <sup>iv</sup> "Haggard Admits 'Sexual Immorality,'" (Associated Press, November 4, 2006).
- <sup>v</sup> "Sex Scandal," *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sex\\_scandal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sex_scandal)
- <sup>vi</sup> Matthew 23: 25, 27-28.
- <sup>vii</sup> Luke 6:42. See also Matthew 7:4-5.
- <sup>viii</sup> Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press), 1997.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), p. 24.
- <sup>x</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, "Introduction," *HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. xvii-xviii.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. xii.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xiii</sup> Mark: 12: 38-39.
- <sup>xiv</sup> "Jim Bakker," *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/jim\\_bakker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/jim_bakker)
- <sup>xv</sup> Charles L. Harper, review of Anne Rowe Seaman, *Swaggart*, in the *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 2 (2000), p. 2.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Matthew 7: 1; see also Luke 6:37.
- <sup>xvii</sup> John 8: 7.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Matthew 5: 5.
- <sup>xix</sup> "Jim Bakker," *Wikipedia*
- <sup>xx</sup> Psalm 146: 3, 7, 9.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Matthew 19: 24; Mark 10: 25; Luke 18: 25