

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Aren't Christians just hypocrites?

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When you read through a list of the most commonly asked questions about Christianity one is “Aren't all Christians hypocrites?” Actually it is more of an accusation than a question. It's the most common reason people give for not wanting to have more to do with Christianity.

It may well be that the question about hypocrisy is asked because of what has happened to a person. Maybe a person grew up in a home where the father was very religious at church but at home has been abusing his children. Perhaps a person has simply read enough news papers to be very wary of priests, considering the number accused of sexual abuse. Perhaps a person in the past went to church, but was terribly hurt by the arrogance and insensitivity of the minister. Maybe it was the betrayal of trust by a church friend. You may well have your own stories of why you think Christians are hypocrites.

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Are Christians hypocrites? Well if by hypocrites we mean people who fail to do what they should be doing, then the answer to our question is: Yes Christians are hypocrites. I'm not talking about people who pretend to be Christians. I am talking about genuine followers of Jesus. Ask them how they think God wants them to live and then ask if they are doing it. They will invariably admit 'No, no not really, I try, but I fail'. If hypocrisy is about failing to do what we should then we are all guilty. We all fail just as much as the next person. The Bible says to “Love your neighbour as yourself. And it also says to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

In other words love God with everything there is in your life, with your very breath and life, every single moment of the day. There isn't a single Christian you will ever meet who could honestly say that they have done that, even for a day. And I would want to say how sorry I am to those who have been hurt because of the failures of Christians. I would not want anyone to miss out on hearing the wonderful news of what we can be through Jesus because our failings have caused hurt and pushed people away.

Now, I don't want to sound defensive, after having just said sorry. But we need to ask, is hypocrisy, simply failing to do the right thing? All human beings fail, from any background and any religion or having no religion. That's part of what it is to be human. We are all broken. We don't manage to do even what we set out to do this morning. We mean well, but the next thing we know, something has triggered an angry response in us, or we have forgotten to do what we had promised.

The Christian should be the first to acknowledge their failures, because central to our belief is that we are sinners who have failed and going on failing God every day. There is no way that we can relate to God and enjoy his favour by our good works. If we are Christians, loved by God, it's not because we are such moral upstanding citizens, middle class people who are models for society. If we are God's children as Christians, it is solely because of the forgiveness that comes through Jesus' death and resurrection.

By the very definition of what it is to be Christian, none of us should ever want to say that we are better than anyone else. That very notion is outside the proper definition of what it is to be Christian.

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Are Christians hypocrites? To answer the question properly we need to define what a hypocrite is. Says my dictionary “Hypocrisy: the pretence of having feelings or characteristics one does not possess, especially the deceitful assumption of virtue.” The word comes from the Greek *hypokrinesthai*- to play a part, to act. This definition fits in with what Jesus said in Matthew 15. Speaking to some Pharisees, Jesus said (:7) “*You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.*”

Now, that is hypocrisy. You say one thing but do another. You say you love God, but in your hearts you have no care for him. Now, interestingly, it’s this hypocrisy that gets Jesus the most upset. Jesus is gentle with most people. But boy does he give it to the Pharisees on this issue of hypocrisy. In Matthew 23 he says “*Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy and faithfulness.*”

The bible commentators say that nowhere else is Jesus so scathing in his language than when he accuses the Pharisees of hypocrisy. So if you say you can’t stand hypocrites you are in good company. Jesus agrees with you totally. One of the reasons Jesus spoke so strongly against hypocrites is that it was the religious leaders of the day who eventually had Jesus killed. You may still feel the hurt done to you by someone who has acted hypocritically. But none of you has felt the pain of it like Jesus did, when he died on the cross because of the hypocritical treachery of the religious leaders of the time.

The great irony is that God took that treachery and used it as the way to bring forgiveness. All of us have broken God’s law, we have rebelled against him. All of us are failures. But God placed the punishment on His own Son. Why? Well, if we believe in Jesus and admit our failure, God forgives us of everything. That is the definition of Christianity in a nutshell. Jesus came for failures. He came and died for the consequences of our failure. A Christian is someone who stops pretending they can be good enough, good enough for themselves, good enough for God; and admits they are not. A Christian is not perfect and makes no claim to be. A Christian is someone who is forgiven and wants to live differently.

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We said that a Christian is someone who is forgiven and wants to live differently. Now it may be in this desire to live differently and please God that we as Christians annoy others. In our endeavour to do the right thing for God, we sometimes challenge others to live differently, you know, to not drink so much, or to behave in a different way. It can give the impression we are better. We are not. We fail in the same areas, if not outwardly, certainly inwardly.

It is sometimes suggested that we shouldn’t say anything about another’s life till we act differently ourselves first. But if Christians do challenge others in their way of life, it is not for their own sake, to look good because the Christian gets it right. It’s done because we care. And above all it’s done for God’s sake. It is for God’s glory we challenge others in what they do, wanting others to love God and live his ways. We do that all the while knowing full well we don’t fully love him either. But the reality is that too often we can come across as Pharisees, and not in grace and mercy. For that we apologise.

Again, please don’t let our failures get in the way of anyone hearing about Jesus and experiencing his love and grace. We can say to those who challenge us Christians for being hypocrites that we beg your patience-

we are a work in progress. John Newton, the slave trader who became a Christian, said towards the end of his life: “As I look back on my life, I realise that I am not what I should be, I am not what I could be, I am not what I will be, but, I am not what I was, and by the grace of God I am what I am.” John Newton is so right. Only by the grace of God, through faith, are any of us a child of God. We don’t criticise hospitals for being full of sick people. Well, Jesus said “Only the sick have need of a physician”. It wasn’t just the nice people, the well to do middle class who came to Jesus, but those who realised they were spiritually sick and needed help. Jesus has attracted all sorts, some who were a real mess.

Like a light attracts bugs, so Jesus attracts those who are broken and know it. It may be that in some ways those who are Christians are more broken than others. They know it and see their need of Jesus.

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Are Christians hypocrites? Probably too often that’s true, but not all the time. We are just as prone to fail ourselves, each other or God as anyone else. I am a Christian not because it’s the cultural thing to do, or because I like to hang out with nice people, good people. I am a Christian because I am spiritually sick and need help and I need hope, hope I have found in Jesus.

I pray that none of my failings or even hypocrisy will get in the way of any of you coming to find Jesus as your saviour as well. With Jesus we find the way home to God. With Jesus we find forgiveness and amazing grace. With Jesus we sense God’s love in our lives and a great hope for the future.