

SESSION 5 NOTES

Why Is the Church Responsible for So Much Injustice? Why Are Christians Such Hypocrites?

Opening Thought

In this peculiar way, Christianity is internally consistent—the church is full of sinners because in order to be a Christian a person has to admit that he or she is a sinner. In other words, it is not really a surprise that Christians sin, that there is an inconsistency between what they say and what they do, because the Bible explains again and again why people’s hearts are drawn toward selfishness and pride and so on. The Bible says “this is how you should live if you believe this” but it also says “you can’t and you won’t” and provides a solution to that problem in Jesus. Christianity, unlike other religions or self-help programs, acknowledges it cannot be followed perfectly.

The Objection

People feel that they cannot identify with an institution such as the church or with Christian individuals when they see such an appalling record of injustice or hypocrisy.

Video Notes — <http://youtu.be/q5eUSXUeYWU>

Questions for Discussion

1. **One of the video participants said, “I think the objectionable Christians that I’ve seen [struggle with loving their neighbor] ... I see them being judgmental, I see them being extremely self-righteousness, and I see them holding people that they deem to be sinners to a different standard than they would themselves, and I find that to be extremely problematic.” What do you think about this statement? Do you know people who feel this way?**
2. **How would you answer the charge that the church is judgmental and full of hypocrites?**
 - Unfortunately, this is sometimes the case. Possible reasons:
 - Because of a well-intended misunderstanding or misapplication of the Bible

- Because Christians are sinners and are indeed judgmental and fail to live up to their standards
- Because of pure thoughtlessness (i.e., “Before I was a Christian I used to...” can come across as judgmental)
- There certainly are inconsistent people in the church (i.e., those who say one thing but do another; those who know they are doing something wrong, but they put up a front), but there are inconsistent people everywhere. There just aren’t that many people whose lives really match their rhetoric; none of us are as kind or patient or forgiving, etc. as we know we should be or want to be.
- R. C. Sproul writes, “The Christian church is one of the few organizations in the world that requires a public acknowledgement of sin as a condition for membership. In one sense the church has fewer hypocrites than any institution because by definition the church is a haven for sinners. If the church claimed to be an organization of perfect people then her claim would be hypocritical. But no such claim is made by the church. There is no slander in the charge that the church is full of sinners. Such a statement would only compliment the church for fulfilling her divinely appointed task” (*Reason to Believe* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 78-79).
- Some have used the classic example of the church being like a hospital for spiritually sick people and shown that we should expect, then, that the church contains sick, inconsistent people. Others would object to that, as one participant in the video did, on the basis of there being a difference between the patients and the doctors—that is, church leadership, like the doctors, shouldn’t be infecting the patients, but helping them. His point was that it often seems that church leadership is exacerbating the problem of hypocrisy, not alleviating it. While that is unfortunately true in some cases, we can respond (1) even doctors get sick and/or mess up in their practice, yet (2) “doctors” (i.e., church leadership) must indeed be more careful about their spiritual health (cf. James 3:1).
- Furthermore, a couple of the video participants admitted two additional observations that unfortunately add to this charge of hypocrisy. First, it is those who visibly/verbally express their moral ethic (i.e., Christians) who are most vulnerable to the scrutiny of others—their failure and hypocrisy is more evident and more obviously discovered and thus more easily criticized and condemned. Second, within Christendom, since there is no formal standard of becoming a Christian, people of all kinds can claim to be “Christian”—it’s inevitable that some are disingenuous and bring reproach upon sincere Christians through their inconsistent behavior.

3. The video host said, “Why wouldn’t a church be a place where you would find inconsistent, broken people who don’t always get it right?” Can you give examples of people from the Bible who are thought of as great or important figures, but who were also broken or flawed in some way?

- David — Israel’s greatest King, given an everlasting covenant by God, called “a man after God’s own heart”; he was an adulterer and murderer and really struggled with his family
- Peter — one of Jesus’ closest disciples and the leader of the twelve, who preached the sermon at Pentecost; he lied to protect himself at Jesus’ expense, betrayed Jesus, and practiced social hypocrisy with the Gentiles

4. In his book *God is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens addresses a hypothetical question he was asked on a panel with radio host Dennis Prager: If he were alone in an unfamiliar city at night, and a group of strangers began to approach him, would he feel safer or less safe, knowing that these men had just come from a prayer meeting? Hitchens answers,

“Just to stay within the letter ‘B,’ I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case ... I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance” (Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007], 18).

Hitchens then gives detailed descriptions of the tense social and political situations within these cities, which he attributes to religion. Many people believe that religions like Christianity inevitably lead to violence and oppression. How do you respond?

- Acknowledgement — (1) violence done in the name of Christianity (or any religion or philosophy) is a terrible reality and must be both addressed and redressed; (2) any religion can take transcendent ideas and combine them with feelings of superiority, and that mixture can turn explosive.
- Response — The statement that religion leads to violence is too simplistic.
 - The communist regimes of the 20th century (atheistic by design) perpetuated horrific acts of violence and injustice in the name of the state.

- Apparently, there is something deep in human nature that leads us to make some idea or value transcendent or absolute in order to claim superiority and have an excuse to oppress or do violence.
- Some Christians have failed to resist this impulse, but the universality of violence means we cannot pin the problem on religion. The problem is within us.

5. One of the video participants said, “I thought the point was really compelling—it actually struck me—trying to put yourselves in the shoes of the person rather than interpret their actions through your own lens.” Do people you know generally behave like this? Why or why not? Why might it be important to do this?

- We might be mistaking or misunderstanding their position, their demeanor/spirit, their purpose/motive, etc. unless we try to see it from their perspective.
- For example, a pastor’s intensified energy when warning against homosexuality may not be judgmental animosity; instead, his commitment to God’s honor and desire to protect people from sin’s destruction may honestly be compelling him to share what he believes to be life-flourishing truth!
- Similar to this consideration is something the video host mentioned in a previous discussion. There he candidly asked for non-Christians to be sympathetic as they seek to understand why we proclaim the exclusivity of Jesus Christ—it is not that we feel superior and judgmental (although some Christians undoubtedly come across that way and may even unfortunately think that about themselves); instead, since we truly believe He is who He said He was, we have to believe in His sufficiency alone!

6. What do you tend to do when you read a text in the Bible that you do not immediately understand and whose meaning offends and/or upsets you?

7. What advice would you give people who read a text in the Bible that they do not immediately understand and whose meaning offends and/or upsets them?

- Consider the possibility that it does not teach what you think it teaches. — Cf. Luke 24:13-32 where the Emmaus disciples don’t understand Scripture and are discouraged until it is explained and their understanding is corrected. Keller writes, “Be patient with the text. Many of the things people find offensive can be cleared up with a decent commentary that puts the issue into historical context. The text may not be teaching what you think it is.”

- *Consider the possibility that you are misunderstanding what the Bible teaches because of your own cultural blinders OR consider the possibility that you may be offended by certain biblical texts because of an unexamined assumption of the superiority of your own cultural moment.*
 - Cf. Luke 24:13-32 where the Emmaus disciples were disappointed because they were thinking about the redemption of Israel and not the redemption of the world; their cultural blinders had caused them to misunderstand the biblical text.
 - Furthermore, a text may be regressive and offensive to one culture, but perfectly acceptable in another (e.g., a culture that rejects what the Bible says about sex, but embraces what it says about forgiveness; and visa versa). Why should one set of cultural sensibilities trump everybody else's?
 - If the Bible really is the revelation of God and not the product of any one culture, why wouldn't it offend some cultural sensibilities at some point?
- *Distinguish between major themes and messages of the Bible and its less primary teachings.*
 - Some people will reject the Bible because, for example, of what it says about gender roles. However, they need to be reminded that even Christians themselves differ over what some texts mean in regards to gender roles, but that all Christians agree Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. People don't need to worry about gender roles until they have decided what they think about the central teachings of the faith.
 - Consequently, some will appeal, "But I can't accept the Bible if what it says about gender is outmoded." We can respond this way—"Are you saying that because you don't like what the Bible says about gender roles that Jesus couldn't have been raised from the dead? If Jesus is the Son of God, then that is more important than these minor issues, and we have to take His teaching seriously. If He is not who He says He is, why should we care what the Bible says about anything else."
- *Remember that all of Scripture is about Jesus.* — The confused Emmaus disciples needed to be reminded of this: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scripture concerning Himself." If you think the Bible is all about you (i.e., what you must do and how you must live), then you do not need Jesus; you only need the rules, and the Bible only serves to tell you those rules and how to please God and be a good person. We should read the Bible as if its all about Jesus and what He has done for us.

8. In the discussion, the video host quotes Martin Luther who said, "All of life is repentance." Explain.

- While most religions operate on this principle—"If I live as I ought, I will be accepted by God"—Christianity has a completely different operating principle—"If I am accepted by God as a gift through what Christ has done, then I will try to live as I ought."
- Christians understand they will always fail to live as they should, and that therefore they need forgiveness and grace. In fact, the prerequisite to becoming a Christian is admitting that you have this problem and that you need God's help. And such confession and repentance becomes a required part of continuing as a Christian (cf. 1 John 1:9).
- Only people who rely on religious morality instead of grace for their relationship to God can maintain a sense of superiority (and thus possible oppression and violence). Only those who do not routinely repent can be thoroughgoing hypocrites.
- Challenge for Christians — Practice this! If our hypocrisy is an excuse (even a bad excuse) for rejection of the gospel (cf. Titus 2:5, 8, 10; 1 Peter), then let us deal seriously with our hypocrisy/sinfulness.
 - Isaiah 57:15 — God dwells with the contrite and humble
 - James 4:6-10 — hate your sin and repentantly turn from it
 - Isaiah 58; Malachi — God hates the hypocrisy of His people
 - Revelation 3:14-22 — thoroughgoing hypocrites are not genuine believers

For the Christian, our humble admission and contrite confession of sin receives the redeeming grace of God because the One we are trusting in and who advocates for us was Himself perfectly blameless and consistent—He bore the penalty of our hypocrisy so that we might receive the grace of His holy humility.

9. The video host said on the DVD, “In the Old Testament and especially in the New Testament with Jesus, there are internal self-critiques by the believing community on ... religious hypocrisy or in the New Testament ‘pharisaism.’” What is the difference between “pharisaism” (or moralism) and the gospel?

- Keller states, “The difference between a Pharisee in the New Testament and a Christ-follower is not that the Pharisee and the Christian aren’t both trying to obey God; they actually are ... but [the Pharisee] is doing it not only self-righteously and feeling superior to other people [Luke 18:9-14], but when they do wrong they won’t admit it and so there is not this theme of humble repentance.”
- In the Sermon on the Mount (and in other discourses), Jesus gave a strong rebuke of religious hypocrisy or moralism. Jesus wasn’t against moral living and religious practices, but He was pointing out that people often do those things in order to feel superior to others, and thus feel themselves to deserve deference and respect from all others.
- Instead, Jesus taught that “the last will be first” (Matthew 19:30); that you find your life by giving it away (Mark 8:35); that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35); that no one is good enough to earn God’s favor (Luke 18:18-30).
- And, Jesus Himself lived that out by sacrificing Himself so that His followers could be reconciled to God. At the heart of the Christian faith is a man who died a victim of injustice, but who called for the forgiveness of His oppressors. This is why the paradoxical symbol at the center of Christianity is not a giant throne embossed with gold, but a wooden cross stained with blood—it expresses that at the center of Christianity is a God who surrendered His power so that others could live. This is the gospel, and it is in complete contrast to moralism.

Final Thought

The effect of the Christian message is that it changes your identity. Your identity becomes defined by what God has done for you in Jesus, in what God thinks of you in Jesus. If that identity is not beginning to show itself in your attitude toward other races and classes, toward the poor and oppressed, toward people who differ from you in their opinions or beliefs, you may say that you have faith but your faith is dead