

## **Evangelicals, Pharisees and Hypocrisy** *an exposition of Luke 11: 37 - 12:3*

*"This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man."  
(Hamlet, act I, scene iii, lines 78-80)*

Shakespeare's famous advice in his play Hamlet on the supreme importance of integrity. As a playwright, of course, he was more familiar than most with the business of acting a part; and as a student of human behaviour he had clearly observed that such theatricals were not confined to the stage. All too often the image we project of ourselves is an artificial one - a role we play for the benefit of others, but which is not really "us". Up to a point, no doubt, this adoption of roles is unavoidable, even necessary for the smooth running of society. But, carried too far or into the wrong arena of our lives, it can become immensely destructive.

In this exposition, we study a section of Luke's gospel in which Jesus makes plain the dangers of religious play-acting, or to use his word for it - hypocrisy.

*"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees."* (12:1)

"Yeast" is a powerful ingredient - just a little in a batch of dough is sufficient to permeate every ounce of the cooked loaf. Here it is clearly a metaphor for a similarly pervasive form of subtle moral corruption which Jesus observed in the religious people of his day. The Greek word "*hypokrites*" meant literally an actor - someone who wore a mask on the stage to perform in classic Greek drama. Sadly, in Jesus' estimation, the religion ostentatiously paraded by some in first century Judaea had a similarly histrionic quality. Like yeast, it subtly affected everything about them, often without them being in the least aware of it.

If you examine our study passage carefully you will see that Jesus pronounces a series of 6 "woes" against various aspects of "hypocritical" behaviour. They are addressed to two distinct, though not unrelated, groups of people:

- in 11: 37 - 44 Jesus addresses 3 woes to the Pharisees
- in 11: 45 - 52 he addresses 3 woes to the "teachers in the law" (or "scribes")

The Pharisees were a party of fundamentalist laymen. Passionately committed to the inerrancy of the Bible, diligent sabbatarians, ardent churchgoers, they were models of religious zeal who prided themselves on the discipline of their prayer, their acts of charity and their moral rectitude.

*In short, if the Pharisees were with us today they would indisputably label themselves "evangelicals".*

The "teachers in the law" (or scribes), on the other hand, though many of them were drawn from the ranks of the Pharisees and continued to have a close relationship with them, were professional Bible students. They made their living by their meticulous attention to the text of the Old Testament and the painstaking scholarship of their interpretation of its moral requirements. They gave public lectures and taught classes of students. Their advice was often sought in cases of legal jurisprudence. Some of them gained national renown for their academic achievements.

*So, if the "teachers in the law" were with us today they would undoubtedly be regarded as evangelical theologians. Some would be on the staff of prominent churches and others would be lecturers at Bible colleges and seminaries.*

As classes of people then, the scribes and the Pharisees were not unique to first-century Judaism. They bear an uncomfortable similarity to the sort of people we evangelical

Christians admire, or indeed, the sort of people we are. And, though it grieves me to say it, the subversion of true spirituality which Jesus in these verses so ruthlessly exposes is all too common among them ... and us.

It's important to note that, because it's very easy when you read the 6 woes to relate them to everybody but yourself. Hypocrisy, as we said earlier, is a very subtle vice; like yeast, pervasive and yet camouflaged - it thrives on self-deception. We need to beware, then, as we listen to Jesus rebuking the hypocritical piety of the religious establishment of his day, lest in pointing a finger at others we fail look in the mirror ourselves.

With that cautionary proviso, let's study the six characteristics of hypocrisy which Jesus identifies.

### **1. Hypocrisy is preoccupied with religious externals to the neglect of true inward goodness**

*A Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him, so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.(v. 37 - 39)*

The background to this incident is the ceremonial washing which the law of Moses laid down in the event of certain kinds of a ritual defilement. Often these washings can be shown to have a rational basis in personal and public hygiene, but such considerations were not the issue for the Pharisees. No, for them, ceremonial washing had become a way of exhibiting their religious fanaticism. Over the years, the scribes had developed Jewish ritual ablutions into an art-form, adding regulations far in excess of anything Moses laid down ... and the Pharisees were scrupulous in their observance of such rules.

But Jesus wasn't!

Hence the raised eyebrow in v. 38: how could a rabbi disregard the demands of ceremonial purity so blatantly? For Jesus the answer was quite simple. God is the creator not just of the external appearance but the inner nature of human beings - and the sanctification he is really looking for is, therefore, one that expresses itself in a generous heart, not just clean hands.

*"You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside (the dish) to the poor, and everything will be clean for you." (v. 40-41)*

The Pharisees' preoccupation with ritual washing was, for Jesus, an absolute giveaway as far as their spiritual mindset was concerned. Cleanliness, for them, was not "next to godliness" - it was godliness. Jesus insists that is not true biblical holiness - it is hypocrisy - and he tells them so!

Would he say the same to us "evangelicals" today, I wonder? True we don't go in for ceremonial washing - but we have plenty external labels that we attach to our behaviour that fulfil the same function of making our piety conspicuous, don't we?

- the bowed head before we eat
- the large Bible under the arm on our way to church
- the religious cliché that replaces "Yours sincerely"
- the text on the wall
- the sticker on the car windscreen

There's nothing wrong with any of these things of course. We can even justify them as acts of "witness" to the pagan world around us. But the Pharisees would have justified their ritual ablutions in precisely that way too, of course.

The real test, according to Jesus, is what's going on inside. Is the house really clean, or have we just swept the dirt under the carpet and pasted a shiny veneer over the wood-wormed and rotten timber of our true selves?

Hypocrisy is preoccupied with religious externals to the neglect of true inward goodness.

## **2. Hypocrisy is preoccupied with legalistic details to the neglect of major moral issues**

*"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone." (v. 42)*

The tithe was, once again, a law laid down by Moses. It required Jews to contribute a tenth of their income to support the levitical priesthood. But once again, the scribes had developed this into a tiresome routine whereby the really pious individual contributed not just 10% of their money, but 10% of everything, even down to the bunches of herbs hanging in their kitchens to flavour their food!

Such pedantic attention to detail, of course, is characterised today by psychologists as a symptom of obsessional compulsive disorders. So the suspicion must be raised that there is something similarly neurotic about Pharisaical religion.

Psychiatrists observe that the driving force behind a good deal of compulsive behaviour is the desire to avoid feelings of anxiety, often that specific kind of anxiety focussed around moral issues that we call "guilt". All of us, deep inside, know that we are moral failures, and one way to escape from the personal devastation of facing up to that fact is to concentrate on the observance of little rules - little rules which, though irksome, lie within our competence and so can be fully kept. By obeying such little rules, you see, our attention is distracted from the big rules, with regard to which our obedience can never be satisfactory and which constitute, therefore, an inexhaustible source of potential moral anxiety for us. To put it simply, legalism is a substitute for repentance. It is a way of enabling us to feel good about ourselves and avoiding the self-despair into which a radical admission of our sin would propel us.

It's not what you Pharisees do that's the problem, says Jesus. If you want to tithe your herbs that's perfectly laudable. It's the reason you engage in such pedantic nitpicking that bothers me. You attend to such petty details in order to evade the full force of God's moral requirement on your life. As he puts it so graphically in Matthew's version of these woes: *"You strain out the gnat that has fallen into your tea and swallow a camel!"*

Again, would he same of us "evangelicals", I wonder?

True, there is probably no diced mint or rosemary in the offering bag on Sunday, but there are plenty of obsessional personalities in the church who use similar tactics to avoid the big moral issues in their lives. Plenty of Christian women who try to tame their unruly consciences by the liberal use of disinfectant in the bathroom or by counting their calories with meticulous accuracy. Plenty of Christian men who hope to affirm a spotless life by mowing the lawn or polishing the car three times a week.

Don't you realise, says Jesus, that God is really not interested in such irrelevant trivia - it is the big issues that concern him. Big issues which, this Christmas, may not be so remote from the one raised by the magazine of that title sold on our streets by the homeless. No matter how neatly marked your Bible, or how precisely scheduled your Quiet Time - it's justice and love that matter to God.

But hypocrisy is preoccupied with legalistic details to the neglect of such major moral issues

### **3. Hypocrisy is preoccupied with gaining applause to the neglect of having a positive spiritual influence on others**

*"Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the market-places." (v. 43)*

We know from other comment in the Gospels that the delight which the Pharisees took in their public reputations went sometimes to ludicrous lengths. Jesus observes here how they made sure they always sat in the front pew in church, and how they self-consciously greeted one another in an extravagant attention-seeking manner when they went to the shops. But that was only half of it. There were their grandiloquent prayers, offered on the street corner of places and in a very loud voice. Then there was their ridiculously ostentatious manner of dress, specially designed to parade their faithfulness of Scripture. There was the pompous way they gave to charity, hiring a trumpeter to announce their intention so everybody had the opportunity to watch. Perhaps most farcical of all, there was their exhibitionist display of what the French call "mauvaise honte" when fasting - deliberately exaggerating the signs of their austerity with cosmetically applied ash on the face and hair, to make sure their voluntary humiliation was duly noted by the general public.

One could go on - their entire religion was performed according to Jesus "for the praise of men" rather than God. But ironically, the very people they were trying so hard to impress were in fact being subtly corrupted by their shabby example.

*"Woe to you, because you are like unmarked grave, which men walk over without knowing it." (v. 44)*

To have contact with a corpse was ritually defiling for a Jew, so cemeteries were usually very clearly marked. Unmarked graves represented a religious hazard in Judaea, much as a concealed pothole would to a hill-walker. Well, says Jesus, you Pharisees are walking man-traps of that kind, but because you decorate your lives with sanctimoniousness, nobody realises the fact. People are influenced by you, admire you, emulate you even, and think by doing so they are getting closer to heaven, when in point of fact they are simply being diverted onto a spiritual sidetrack that heads in totally the opposite direction.

Once again, would he say the same of us "evangelicals", I wonder?

A lot of people judge what Christianity is from what they see of us. Is the picture we give a true one? Is our spiritual influence on the world a healthy one? Or is it merely, like the Pharisees, an exercise in narcissistic exhibitionism - is everyone watching a pantomime and failing to see the joke?

The story is told of a man who was exceptionally pleased one day because his wife called him a model husband ". He decided to look up the word "model" in the dictionary to find out what an outstanding compliment this was. That's where he saw it: "model: a small plastic imitation of the real thing".

Is that the kind of "model Christian" we are - a synthetic fake?

How did Jesus put it in that famous Sermon on the Mount - "you are the salt of the earth - but if salt loses its distinctive taste it's good for nothing" That's what the Pharisees had become a load of spiritual "good for nothings".

- *Hypocrisy is preoccupied with religious externals to the neglect of true inward goodness*
- *Hypocrisy is preoccupied with legalistic details to the neglect of major moral issues*
- *Hypocrisy is preoccupied with gaining applause to the neglect of having a positive spiritual influence on others*

You would have thought such a damning triad of woes would be enough, but Jesus is spurred to deliver three more - and this time it's the scribes that come into his sights.

*One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say things you insult us also." (v. 45)*

Indeed I do, says Jesus - you scribes are just as bad as the Pharisees, in fact, your worse - for you make money out of it!

#### **4. Hypocrisy makes religion arduous and unattractive to people**

*Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them." (v.46)*

Here Jesus is referring to that mass of legalism and casuistry which, as we've already said, was the scribes stock in trade. According to the Psalmist the study of Bible should be a delight, and God's law in particular he said was sweeter than the honeycomb to his taste. But the scribes had desiccated biblical religion into a tedious and laborious catalogue of thou-shalt's and thou-shalt-not's.

They made people think they couldn't be acceptable to God unless they dotted every "i" and crossed every "t" of their impossibly complicated system of regulations.

- Where the Bible offered mercy - they offered rules.
- Where the Bible offered forgiveness - they offered more rules.
- Where the Bible offered grace - they offered still more rules

Why? because they had a professional interest in rules, of course. They were lawyers, so the more rules the better as far as they were concerned. They weren't really interested in people's spiritual or moral welfare - only in their own professional powerbase within the community.

Would he say the same of our "evangelical" preachers and theologians, I wonder?

We who are so devoted to biblical exposition - do we make the Bible wearisome and dull? Would he say of us that we turn Christianity from a religion of joyful emancipation into a laborious bondage to formidable list of do's and don't's? Do we complicate things deliberately so people depend on us more to know what to do?

Hypocrisy makes religion arduous and unattractive to people

#### **5. Hypocrisy makes people intolerant and incapable of change**

*"Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets and you build their tombs." (v. 47-48)*

A stinging accusation this, yet that can be no question of its legitimacy. Down through the history of the Jews, time and time again, it was the religious establishment, the spiritual antecedents of the scribes and Pharisees, who had persecuted those God had sent as his spokespersons.

Amos was threatened by Amaziah the priest of Bethel. Jeremiah was beaten up and placed in the stocks at the command of Passhur, the chief officer of the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, the majority of the prophets had ended their lives as martyrs, and as often as not it was the professional clergy who engineered their deaths. Bible students though they professed themselves to be, they were the very last people to recognise divine inspiration when they encountered it face to face.

Oh, admits Jesus, with an unmistakably sarcastic edge to his tone, they canonised dead prophets all right - but living ones they executed! Why? Because they were not really interested in a contemporary word from God - a truly prophetic word addressing their day and their lives was far too challenging and unsettling. It demanded change, and the religious establishment had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

It was precisely the same in Jesus' day. Galilean peasants could recognise his messiahship; Roman centurions could see it; blind beggars and demon-possessed lunatics could see it; but the scribes and Pharisees would conspire to nail him to a cross.

*"Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all." (v. 49-51)*

Abel and Zechariah stood symbolically as the A to Z of biblical martyrology. From the beginning of the Old Testament to its end, people who spoke for God by the righteousness of their lives and the divine authority of their words paid for it with their lives. And, predicts Jesus ominously, this generation - the generation I am currently addressing - will prove no different. Indeed, this generation will commit the final and most appalling act of homicidal sacrilege of all.

One recalls that parable of the vineyard which Luke recounts a few chapters later. The Owner sent servants to demand the fruit of the vineyard - but they scorned and rejected them. "What shall I do?" the Owner asked himself. "I will send my son, whom I love. Surely they will respect him." But the tenants in the vineyard said to one another: "This is the heir, let's kill him and the vineyard will be ours!"

Would Jesus say the same of our evangelical church leaders and theologians today, I wonder?

So secure in their Christian orthodoxy; so confident about their biblical hermeneutics; so smug about their theological correctness. "We have a law and by that law he deserves to die - Crucify him, Crucify him."

Oh yes - evangelical leaders have crucified a few prophets in their time. Had they been there in Jesus' day I fear some of them would have cheerfully handed this "liberal heretic"

over to the Romans - and congratulated themselves on doing so. The last thing one can ever imagine some evangelicals leaders doing is admitting they might have been wrong about something.

For hypocrisy makes people intolerant and incapable of change.

## **6. hypocrisy renders saving truth inaccessible to both the hypocrites themselves and to all those who depend on their testimony**

*"Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."*  
(v. 52)

An accusation, surely, the seriousness of which even trumps the murder of the prophets! They have locked the door of the kingdom of God and thrown away the key. Searching souls who come to them because of their reputation for biblical learning, not only go away empty-handed, but positively obstructed in their quest.

- instead of the attractiveness of biblical religion they find only a burdensome legalism
- instead of a life-changing encounter with the prophetic word, they find only blinkered intolerance
- instead of the saving knowledge of the gospel of the kingdom, they find only the disillusioning dead-end of religious theatrical

Is it possible he would say the same of the speakers and writers that we lionise in our evangelical conferences and bookshops? That for all their talk of the way of salvation, the fact is they don't know the way to heaven and mislead cruelly those who are foolish enough to follow their directions. Blind guides, Jesus calls them elsewhere; you not only fall into the ditch yourself, you take others with you.

No wonder he draws his disciples away from the surging crowds in the verses that follow, as if to warn them of the threat which the popularity and admiration sought by the religious establishment posed to true spirituality.

*"Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." (12:1)*

Six times he has pronounced that awesome word "Woe" against them. It isn't a threat, or even a rebuke - it's a word of grief. This is the word the mourners wailed over a coffin. Jesus is not just angry with the scribes and Pharisees - he pities them. They are pathetically self-deceived - doomed to have their precious delusions about themselves shattered by the awful blast of divine judgement.

*"There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs." (12: 2 -3)*

All their theatrical piety, all their pretentious sanctimoniousness; on the day of judgement it would be about as much use as Salome's seven veils in a Force 10 gale. Their spiritual poverty, their naked duplicity, their self-serving machinations against godly men and women - it would become obvious to all. The dark secrets of their lives so long hidden under that veneer of religiosity - they will all be told. And their humiliation would be total. "You brood of

snakes!" Jesus said to them on another occasion. "How will you escape being condemned to Hell?"

What is the answer to that awful prospect?

For as we have repeatedly observed, the scribes and Pharisees don't represent categories remote from us. Their modern day equivalents are among us; indeed, could we, 21st century evangelicals perhaps be numbered among them?

How can we make sure we are not?

I believe there is a remedy for that fear - it is simple and lies within the compass of all of us.

*"When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6: 5-6)*

You want to to avoid the charge of hypocrisy ? Here is the answer: *be real with God!* In the secret place of prayer, where there is no audience to applaud or impress, tell your heavenly Father the truth about yourself.

Do you remember those wise words of Shakespeare with which we began? *"This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."* I remember quoting them to a young woman in my former church in Cambridge many years ago, and her response was: "But that's my problem Roy - I can't find that inner integrity. Back at home I am the good Christian, the chaste virgin, the perfect daughter. But up here in Cambridge I'm in a lesbian relationship with another girl. I hate the false image I project - but I can't find the real me anymore. How do I know the whole fabric of my Christian life isn't a tissue of lies - an act I put on to please other people - just like the Pharisees did. If I can't be open and honest about my sexuality in church, it kind of corrodes my spiritual assurance."

I sympathised with her - more deeply actually than she realised at the time.

But this problem of elusive identity is not unique to gay Christians. It is in fact the root of a human dilemma that has preoccupied a lot of modern philosophy. For we exist as self-conscious individuals only as a result of the relationships we have with others. How then can we discover personal authenticity that is independent of the moulding influence of other people's perception of us. How can we find the person we truly are in ourselves?

The playwright Harold Pinter explored this theme in a radio play he wrote back in the 1960's. Here are a few lines from it:

*"The point is, who are you? Occasionally I believe I perceive a little of what you are, but that's pure accident. No it's nothing like an accident, it's deliberate, it's a joint pretence. We contrive the accident in order to continue - who are you? How can I be certain of what I see? You're the sum of so many reflections, how many reflections, whose reflections, are reflections all that you consist of?"*

Here is the greatest fear of the modern individualist: that at root there is no "self" to be true to. The scenes change, the other actors change, and our parts change as a result, but we never leave the stage; we never stop acting. We wear one mask at church, another at work, another still at home; we have dozens in our wardrobe and one of them is always on our



face. But there is no role in our repertoire that is more authentically "us" than any other. We are just a kaleidoscope reflecting the images that other people want to have of us.

Hypocrisy, on this view, is not so much a vice as the essence of our human condition!

I tell you no - it isn't so - there is one relationship in our lives which rightly claims the right to define our true identity. There is one place where the masks come off - "where there is nothing concealed that isn't disclosed": *a personal relationship with God.*

I want to offer that to you relationship if you've never found it before.

Perhaps you want to know, like that lesbian young woman, who you really are? You want to be delivered from the vicious cycle of hypocrisy and pretence. Here is my advice. Go a place of total privacy - don't even let others know you are there. And talk to God your heavenly Father about your innermost thoughts and feelings.

It's not always easy to do that, because not all of us have had much practice at such self-disclosure. It is a characteristic of dysfunctional families that members cannot communicate their real emotions with one another. And a good deal of mental illness is born in that seething prison of emotional repression.

But be assured - God is not a dysfunctional father - he wants you to be real with him - indeed, so penetrating are his eyes, it is pointless to try to be anything else.

I promise you, that person you are there, alone with God, is the real you. It is the person who will on that awesome day of judgement stand stripped of all pretence before him. And through prayer you can get in touch with that true self now.

The key to the kind of spiritual integrity Jesus demands, and deep down we all long for, is a personal relationship with God. We were designed for such a relationship; in its absence our self-consciousness inevitably floats in a sea of lost identity. But find that relationship and the ship of your life will at last have found safe haven.

One person who made this discovery most movingly was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor imprisoned by the Nazi's. He was forced to suffer the torture of solitary confinement and found it a devastating assault on his self confidence. He knew that outside his friends wanted him to stand firm - but denied their fellowship his resolve began to wane. In a poem later published in his "*Letters and Papers from Prison*" he speaks of his fear of being found a hypocrite and his longing for that elusive integrity that we've been talking about. And in the final line he confesses where he found it. Let me read to you a short section of it - its entitled:

***"Who am I?" (slightly abridged)***

*Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house.*

*Who am I? They often tell me I would talk to my warders freely and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really all that which other men tell of?*

*Or am I only what I myself know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, weary and empty, faint and ready to say farewell to it all?*

*Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another?*

*Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others and before myself as contemptibly woebegone weakling?*

*Who am I? They mock me there lonely questions of mine.*

*Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine!*

I say again - be real with God. There in the absolutely solitary place - where there is no one to applaud or admire. Be God's there! Tell him the secret sins, the secret doubts, the secret fears, the secret griefs. Tell him all those things that threaten to make a hypocrite of you. Be real with God in the secret place. And you will find in that unique relationship your true identity with no hypocritical masks.

And you will no longer need to fear being false to anyone else.