

Treating Our Hypocrisy: A Pandemic Opportunity for Transformation

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“Grant that we may show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith.” That’s what our Collect for today says, and it’s a real butt kicker. It alerts us to the difference between how we *live* and how we *say* we live.

Nobody likes a hypocrite, someone who’s merely pretending or who says one thing but does another. Hypocrites turn us off and make us angry.

Sometimes they’re easy to spot, like the televangelist who rails against the evils of extra-marital relations and then gets caught in one himself. Sometimes they’re hard to spot, especially in people who espouse what we believe. This may explain why the hardest hypocrite to spot is yourself. You *are* a hypocrite, right? I know I am. My hypocrisy is revealed most frequently in my family life. I ask my wife or children to live up to principles that I fail to live up to. I’ve discovered that kids are especially good at detecting hypocrisy. But, it’s hard for us to detect it in ourselves.

Hypocrisy is especially repugnant in people who think it’s important to tell other people how to live. I’ll call them “moralizing hypocrites”. Moralizing hypocrisy is particularly loathsome in religious people. Their hypocritical behavior undermines their own message to others. But, they often don’t see the damage they’re doing to their own cause.

These days Christians have a serious moralizing hypocrisy problem. It’s prevalent in Christians who think an important part of living out one’s faith is to engage in a culture war to defend one’s beliefs and Christ’s honor. It’s a *war*, you see, and the purpose of a war is to defeat your enemies. Culture-war Christianity comes out in magazines, podcasts, news radio, social media. It rings out from pulpits and Christian leaders in positions of power who should know better.

Take, for example, Franklin Graham, the Chair and CEO of Samaritan’s Purse, an international relief organization that provides aid to hundreds of thousands of people. Samaritan’s Purse requires all their workers to sign a statement of faith. This statement requires their workers to say they believe that gay people can’t legitimately be married.

When Graham was recently criticized for rejecting workers in New York because they support gay marriage, he replied: “All our doctors and nurses and staff are Christians. We believe it’s very important that—as we serve people and help people—we do it in Jesus’ name”.¹

In responding this way, Graham is suggesting that anyone who approves of gay marriage isn’t a Christian and can’t help people in Jesus’s name. Of course, this is absurd. I suppose that if Graham were really pressed on this point, he’d concede that some of these folks could be misguided Christians. But, as for working for Samaritan’s Purse, Graham is clear: “we want men and women who believe the way *we* do and have the same core values that we have”.

The irony of this response by the head of a ministry called “Samaritan’s Purse” is staggering. Its name comes from Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan.² You might recall the context: a lawyer and Jesus have been discussing how to obtain the abundant life Jesus has been talking about. They agree that it’s to love God with all your heart, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. The lawyer then asks Jesus, “and who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man has been badly beaten by robbers and left by the side of the road. He needs help. The people you’d expect to help, such as religious leaders, ignore the beaten man. They just walk right by him. But, a Samaritan has compassion for the beaten man, binds his wounds, and pays for his recovery. The shocker is that the Samaritan is regarded as morally inferior, as an alien, as one who doesn’t believe the way *we* do. *He’s* the one who does God’s will, revealing that loving one’s neighbor as oneself doesn’t depend on whether one has the approved of beliefs or is a member of the approved of group.

Now, Samaritan’s Purse takes its name from this parable. And, yet, its CEO is saying: It doesn’t matter how compassionate you are, and it doesn’t matter what *else* you believe: if you support gay marriage, you’re not righteous enough to be a good Samaritan in our organization. The hypocrisy is *obvious* to everyone outside the particular evangelical circles Graham runs in. If Franklin Graham had been the one who

¹ Theoden Janes, “Franklin Graham on Easter amid pandemic: ‘God never intended for man to have disease’,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 10, 2020: <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/living/religion/article241911986.html>

² See Luke 10: 25-37.

asked Jesus, “who is my neighbor?”, whom do you think Jesus would have put in the role of the Good Samaritan?

Many pastors and leaders in conservative Christianity exhibit a dismaying human tendency. They have had a transcendent experience of the divine in their lives. They’ve experienced a great joy of liberation from their old ways of living and seeing the world. They are moved by Jesus’ call away from their selfish, tribal ways of thinking to an expansive vision of the world in which everyone is equally precious and loved. But, as time passes, the old habits of thinking pull them back into the old tribal ways. They begin to withdraw from outsiders. They construct insular communities to protect themselves from people unlike them. They won’t take credit for their status—it’s all God’s doing, they’ll say—but praise God, they’re in the right tribe now, and if you’re not in that tribe, you’re a threat. You probably have the wrong political views and you’ll persecute them if you get half a chance. Before you know it, these folks, who started out with Jesus’ liberating vision, are now requiring allegiance to faith statements that the Good Samaritan could not in good faith sign.

This culture-war Christianity has produced a lot of moral grandstanding in the past 40 years, and people are *sick* of it. It *reeks* of hypocrisy. Anyone who reads the Gospels finds in Jesus a champion of the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the marginalized, the depressed, and the dispossessed. Jesus’ harshest criticisms are pointed at the rich, the powerful, and especially at self-righteous religious people. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules”.³

There’s a general pattern at work in people who get *woke*, or undergo conversion or enlightenment experiences. It starts with something like slavery to selfish, tribal thinking. They then have a liberating experience, which opens their consciousness to a more expansive vision for living. And then over time it degenerates back into tribal thinking but *under a different guise* than before. The regress is *insidious* and very difficult to spot in oneself. And it doesn’t just happen to fundamentalists. It’s a tendency in everyone. For example in the more progressive Christian circles I run in, there’s a tendency to mistake having progressive social attitudes with actually following Christ.

³ Matthew 15:8-9.

We've got the moral high ground; we'll point out the hypocrisy of culture-war Christians, and all the while we're walking right past the person who's been beaten down by life. You see, it's a lot easier to have the right beliefs than it is to bind up a hurting person's wounds, carry him to safety, and pay for his care.

So, how might we Christians, who profess to having been liberated, seek integrity in our lives? To show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith? I want to share some thoughts and strategies that I've found helpful in treating my own hypocrisy.

The first step is to *detect* your own hypocritical actions. You can't work on a problem until you've *identified* it. You need to *know* the contours of your own hypocrisy.

Second, you need a *vivid vision* of yourself without your hypocrisy. You need to see yourself succeeding with integrity. You do this with your *imagination*. You need to flesh out a vision of yourself liberated from your own hypocrisy.

Third, engage in practices designed to retrain your way of thinking and behaving for the purpose of changing your habits. You need practices that will, little by little, make your vision a reality.⁴

It may seem strange to say, but the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic we're living through is a golden opportunity for doing this work of personal transformation. We humans are creatures of habit and habits are extremely difficult to change. Most of us will not change our habits until faced with a serious existential crisis: for example, a doctor tells you that the person you love most in the world has an aggressive form of cancer. A crisis can wake you up, demand your prolonged attention, and motivate you to action.

Well, my friends, we're all in an existential crisis we can't ignore. This pandemic is a deep rupture in life as we know it. It's producing the kind of existential dread and anxiety that we normally keep at bay by our usual business. The pandemic has *forced* us to face a fact about ourselves that we did not believe before. The fact is that our entire

⁴ Although I won't have time to discuss the matter in my presentation, another very important element in effecting change is repeatedly hearing from other people who have undergone change and can inspire us with their insights. In recent months I've been inspired by *The RobCast* (at <https://robbell.com>), by Richard Rohr's *Daily Meditations* (<https://cac.org/2020-daily-meditations/>), and by Tom Morris' wonderful book about transformative change: *Plato's Lemonade Stand: Stirring Change into Something Great* (Wisdom/Works, 2019).

way of life is fragile and we are vulnerable to forces utterly beyond our control. This fact is especially difficult for *Americans* to accept. We think of ourselves as autonomous and independent, technologically advanced, with a military that can protect us from all enemies. But Covid-19 is proving to us that we are wrong. It is *showing us* that we are living a fragile, vulnerable life together as human beings on our planet. It is *revealing* to us that our welfare is bound up with the welfare of all people everywhere.

This realization can be terrifying at first. But, it can also motivate us to imagine new ways to promote human flourishing. The New Testament scriptures provide a powerful vision of an abundant, flourishing life, which is sometimes called “the Kingdom of God”. It’s a world, Jesus taught us, where the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the poor have enough, the downtrodden and depressed are liberated from oppression, and everyone in the world is welcomed to God’s banquet of plenty. Paul of Tarsus, who wrote much of the New Testament, says this kingdom begins here on earth as Jesus’ followers, comprising the body of Christ, use their individual gifts together in a creative, collaborative process to co-create a world of lasting peace, harmony, justice, and mutual love.

How do we go about building this kingdom? Today’s lectionary readings provide some clues. “You have made known to me the ways of life”, the writer of Acts says. So, we need some *knowledge* of the ways of life. Well, we have it. The ways of life just are those we noted in our description of the kingdom of God. But, mere knowledge is not enough. After all, many Christians know these ways but don’t live according to them. We need what will move us from knowledge to *action*.

Today’s reading from the Psalms says, “You will show me the path of life”, and the writer of 1st Peter tells us that the path requires us to undergo various *trials*. We are all surely engaged in a major trial right now.

So, here’s my message today: We’re facing a crisis *so bad* it is forcing us to re-think our old assumptions about human life; and we’re facing a crisis *so big* it can motivate change. The conditions are conducive for personal transformation. Many of us are out of work. Most of us find ourselves with *time* we’ve never had before. I encourage you to carve out some personal time each day for personal reflection, meditation, and imagination.

Most of us will need to undergo substantial *character transformation* to alter our habits. This won't come easily. It will require serious work on your inner life. Resist the urge to beg God to do everything for you. Resist the urge to substitute prayers of supplication for the work of inner transformation. God will help us, but we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work. For Christians, if we're going to avoid moralizing hypocrisy, we must ever keep before our minds Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, which, let us remind ourselves as fervently as we can, is a vision in which God's kingdom comes here *on earth* and God's will is done *on earth* as in heaven. It is thus a vision in which we, the body of Christ, are doing the work of healing the sick, sheltering the homeless, lifting up the depressed and the dispossessed, and welcoming every person on earth to join in God's banquet party where there is plenty for everyone. It has nothing to do with requiring people to sign statements of faith: it's about inner transformation to the mind of Christ for the purpose of serving others. This metamorphosis will take a lot of soul work, and you may not like what you find when you start out. But, keep digging down to find your true self; for as Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is within you".⁵

⁵ Luke 17:21.