

God Expects
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Isaiah 58:1-11

When you go to Google and begin to type in the words of your search they will attempt to finish what you are typing based on the popularity of the search. Based on my own experiment, if you type in “the church is full of...” what do you think Google suggests?

It’s almost the universal criticism of those who want nothing to do with “religion.” They say, “The church is full of hypocrites.” In response to that charge, the late Dr. D. James Kennedy replied: *“Well, there’s always room for one more.”* “He cautioned people that if they found a perfect church, they ought not to join it, since that would ruin it.”ⁱ

My response is that the church IS full of sinners of every type. In fact that is especially true of followers of Christ. What do you mean? By definition the price of admission IS admission --- admitting that we are sinners in need of a Savior. The question is whether those who profess to be followers of Christ are growing more like Jesus and less like our natural sinful nature (sanctification)?

So, what are the implications of “religious hypocrisy?” What is God’s warning to His people? What was Jesus’ stern rebuke to “religious hypocrites” in His day? How should we be on guard if we are Christ-followers? We’ll look at these things.

Big Idea: Though good works can’t earn salvation, God expects His people to demonstrate our faith through right living not religious performance. In our own hearts we should ask, “Is my walk growing more and more like my talk?”

- In Isaiah 58 (and 59) the prophet has become preacher calling out God’s people for “playing church” by putting on a mask of holiness while living day to day in exactly the opposite, unrighteous manner.

- Hypocrisy defined is “a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.”ⁱⁱ
- Put another way, “In essence, “hypocrisy” refers to the act of claiming to believe something but acting in a different manner. The word is derived from the Greek term for “actor”—literally, “one who wears a mask”—in other words, someone who pretends to be what he is not.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- “The Bible calls hypocrisy a sin. There are two forms hypocrisy can take: that of professing belief in something and then acting in a manner contrary to that belief, and that of looking down on others when we ourselves are flawed.”^{iv}
- Hypocrisy can be “do as I say not as I do.” Ever know someone like that?
- We’ve seen that play out in the news this week, but I digress!
- Let’s read these verses then we’ll unpack how it applies to us today.
- Isaiah is speaking God’s message forcefully and loudly to the people.
- For clarity I’m reading these first verses from the New Living Translation.

Isaiah 58:1–5 (NLT) ¹ “Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud! Don’t be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins! ² Yet they act so pious! They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me. ³ ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren’t you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don’t even notice it!’ “I will tell you why!” I respond. “It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. ⁴ What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. ⁵ You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?”

- The first five verses define the transgression and present the indictment.
- God says to Isaiah: *“Tell my people Israel of their sins...they act so pious!”*
- In verse two the key words are “act” and later in the verse “pretending.”
- The people pushed back, *“...we fast and you’re not impressed, Lord.”*
- Fact: It’s possible to “act” righteous without being righteous.
- Jesus called out this counterfeit behavior in Matthew 7:21–23 (NLT)

²¹ “Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. ²² On judgment day many will say to me, ‘Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’ ²³ But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws.’

In Matthew 15:8–9 (NLT) Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13⁸ ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’”

- When someone pretends to be righteous then consistently and habitually lives in an unrighteous manner it’s possible they’ve never had a true salvation experience of regeneration. It’s also possible that they ARE saved but are falling back into their former sinful patterns.
- In Isaiah’s day, it’s clear that the religious rituals of the people of Judah didn’t square with their motives and behavior. They put on a good “show” of religious rituals while oppressing and mistreating people. They were acting like saints in church and living like the devil elsewhere.
- They were going through the motions to impress people, not the Lord.
- The Lord called out sins like oppression and violence against those who couldn’t fight back. Conversely, He spelled out examples of “true religion.”

⁶ “No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. ⁷ Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

James 1:27 (NLT) backs this up, ²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

- Did you notice that last part? James was clearly stating that real ‘religion’ is caring for those who can’t care for themselves, but it is also “refusing to let the world corrupt you.” It’s not just a soft heart; it’s a changed heart.
- So many believe their charity will offset their sin in God’s eyes.
- The only thing that covers over our sin in God’s eyes is the righteousness of Christ that comes by trusting Him as Savior and Lord.
- Thinking of “religious hypocrites” we can imagine two types of behavior:
 1. Religious hypocrite #1 wants just enough ‘religion’ to be respectable but not enough to cramp their style.
 - Our concern for them should be whether they are truly saved.
 - Have they experienced a heart change that has resulted in a change in behavior? Not perfection, but a discernable change.
 2. Religious hypocrite #2 doesn’t really desire holiness; they crave that feeling of superiority when they compare their actions to others. They criticize others while keeping a pen filled with their own “pet sins.”
 - This one can be a temptation even for those we ARE saved.
 - Jesus spoke to this in Matthew 7:1–5 (NLT) ¹ “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. ² For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. ³ “And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when

you have a log in your own? ⁴ How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? ⁵ Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

- Jesus didn't say Christians shouldn't correctly confront sin (He modeled that for us!) He said don't be a hypocrite about it.
- Pastor Craig Groeschel says, *"When judging, Christians tend to accuse others and excuse ourselves. The place where you issue your harshest judgment often reveals your deepest weakness."*
- Back to Isaiah 58. In verse eight, the Lord said when their behavior matched their profession of faith (their walk matched their talk) their relationship with Him would improve.

Isaiah 58:8–11 (ESV) ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. ¹¹ And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

- What a beautiful picture of having relationship instead of religion!
- Right relationship with God brings His people blessings like spiritual healing, righteousness, protection, and answered prayer.
- The Lord promised to *"guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring."*^v

- That's not meaningless rituals or playing church. That's living the abundant life "in Christ."

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Is the church full of hypocrites as the outside world charges?
- Step one to refuting that charge: Strive NOT to be a hypocrite!
- God didn't mince words in this passage. His people are not to wear a "mask of religion" to cover up open disobedience to His word.
- Followers of Christ are not called to perfection in this life but we are called to strive for a holy life lived in obedience to the commands of scripture.
- Christ-followers also must display humility and self-awareness of our own sinfulness rather than accusing others while excusing our own sin.
- That said, let's talk about our witness to the watching world.
- Sometimes I take note of someone's behavior and think: *"Please take that 'fish' off the back of your car! You're making Christ-followers look bad!"*
- The world is watching Christians for inconsistencies in our walk and talk and we should be concerned about the impression we give them.
- Because the church is filled with struggling sinners they assume we are all hypocrites that don't practice what we preach.
- The goal for every follower of Christ is to be a saved sinner who is struggling toward holiness by growing more and more like Jesus.
- Sincerely struggling with sin isn't hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is putting on a mask to look holy while enjoying your sinful behavior behind that mask.
- Instead of wearing a mask of spiritual "perfection" or superiority so we "look good," we should be transparent with unbelievers about the fact that we still struggle with sin but thanks to Christ's sacrifice on the cross we don't have to be controlled as slaves to sin.
- Let's show a watching world that we're not "religious hypocrites," just saved sinners that are striving to grow more like Jesus!

ⁱ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/church-full-hypocrites/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hypocrisy>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-hypocrisy.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-hypocrisy.html>

^{iv} *ibid*

^v Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Is 58:11). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.