

How to Become a Better Hypocrite

Luke 11:37-54

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If you want to be a spiritual hypocrite, the Gospel of Luke has a passage for you! When Jesus accepted the invitation to dine with the religious leaders, they probably didn't expect the confrontation and criticism they were about to receive. In a series of principles for hypocrites, we will see how hypocrisy can be tempting for every Christian, and how only accountability and self-reflection can keep us transparent and honest before God and those around us.

I have read of a rather interesting history behind a popular phrase that originated in China. We still use the phrase to this day, centuries later.

The account revolves around the orchestra that performed year-round for the emperor. It was a massive orchestra with several hundred participants, and it played at all the important events and festival seasons and even in private concerts for the emperor.

It was an incredible honor to be talented enough to be a member of the royal orchestra; it was a lifetime career that came with a generous salary and benefits, and great esteem within the community.

But one particular member of this massive orchestra was an imposter. Without much musical training at all, he had used some of his political connections to gain a seat in the flute section of the royal orchestra.

Whenever the orchestra would practice or perform, he simply held his flute up to his lips, pretending to play.

But suspicions began to grow. Finally, one day, the emperor announced that each member of the orchestra would be scheduled to come to the imperial palace and perform a solo piece for him; he planned on enjoying several days of music.

The imposter who had faked his way through several seasons knew that in a matter of days he would be discovered, his family shamed and, more than likely, he would be executed.

When the day arrived for his solo, this man pretended to be ill; the court physician was dispatched and found nothing wrong with him and ordered him to keep his appointment.

But when the hour to perform drew near, this man took his own life rather than be exposed for his deception and hypocrisy.

Out of this tragic account came the phrase: "He refused to face the music."

Adapted from Robert Jeffress, [The Solomon Secrets](#) (Waterbrook, 2002), p. 128

We use that phrase to this day to refer to someone who can't handle the exposure of accountability, they won't "face the music," they refuse to accept the evidence that their lives are a façade, a performance, rather than genuine and real.

Without realizing it, a dining room filled with religious leaders are about to be called by the Lord to, effectively, face the music.

In a very personal encounter, the Lord is about to expose who they really were. They were imitators of genuine spirituality; they were hypocrites of the highest order.

This encounter between the religious leaders and the Lord Jesus is recorded in the Gospel by Luke and chapter 11.

Now, before we dive in and watch as Jesus deals with them, I don't want us to look at this scene and say, "Would you look at these hypocrites!" No, I want us to say, "Would you look at *us*; they remind me of *myself*."

This encounter is a classic lesson on hypocrisy, which is so easily mastered by every Christians.

And if you'd like to get better at it, Luke chapter 11 is a guideline. In fact, I'm going to entitle this sermon, "How to Become a Better Hypocrite." Because they are going to show us how.

So here we go: six ways to become a better hypocrite!

Here's the first way to hone the skill of hypocrisy:

Focus on external appearances rather than internal attitudes.

Verse 37:

While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.

Luke 11:37-38

Now the Jewish world at this time normally ate two meals a day, a mid-morning meal and then a mid-afternoon meal. Luke's vocabulary indicates it was the mid-morning meal.

Adapted from [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 424

What we might call brunch today.

This hand washing wasn't so much related to a day's worth of dirt; it was a religious ritual.

A station would have been set up with stone jars where purified water would be drawn out to ceremonially cleanse the hands. The Pharisees had been developing this little ritual for the previous 500 years.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 307

But here, it's as if Jesus just walks past the water jar, sits down, and grabs a piece of toast and asks for the butter.

By the way, at this stage in Christ's ministry, the religious leaders are already bent on killing Him.

Warren W. Wiersbe, [Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13](#) (Victor Books, 1998), p. 129

So, this invitation to brunch was obviously a set up and Jesus knew it.

You see, Jesus accepted this invitation, not because He was hungry but because He was going to give us a lesson on hypocrisy—what it looks like, how dangerous it can become, how to detect it.

Now verse 38 again:

The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. And the Lord said to him "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools!"

Luke 11:38-40a

The guy passing the butter dish probably dropped it in his lap. Everybody freezes.

Verse 40:

Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.

Luke 11:40b-41

Jesus more than likely pointed to the mugs and plates on that table and said, “Can you imagine cleaning the outside, but not caring about the inside?”

That would be like you forgetting your coffee mug over the weekend, you left it in the car. Finally, you bring it inside and scrub away the outside of it until it’s squeaky clean, then you pour a cup of coffee while on the inside you’ve still got old coffee and cream that’s all coagulated in there—things are beginning to grow in there. Things that are looking up at you.

So what? The outside looks great!

You don’t do that, unless you’re in college—at least I did.

You’ll notice here in **verse 39** that the outside is clean but there’s greed and wickedness on the inside, but you don’t care, so long as you can polish your image.

No, no, if you want to be clean, start on the inside. Down where greed and wickedness grow.

To try to clean up your life, you don’t start with your public image; it starts on the inside.

Warren Wiersbe illustrated this text by saying you can’t clean up your language by brushing your teeth. You start with the heart.

Wiersbe, p. 130

You want to become a better hypocrite? Then make sure you focus more on external appearances than internal attitudes.

Secondly:

Applaud yourself for small successes, while turning a blind eye to greater failures.

Now that Jesus has launched into this response, He just keeps going. I imagine everybody’s fork is now frozen in midair; **verse 42**:

“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

Luke 11:42

Jesus says that it's good that they've been careful to give. He's not even getting onto them here for this kind of precision in keeping all the tithing regulations that had grown up in their religious world.

The Mosaic law never commanded the tithing of kitchen herbs and spices.

Bruce B. Barton, Life Application Bible: Luke (Tyndale House, 1997), p. 305

But these guys are so careful to check off every box.

So, they're counting out their little mint leaves and making sure one of every ten goes to the temple.

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 2 (Crossway, 1998), p. 23

They're counting off one little dill seed out of 10—man, how dedicated can you be?

But what about greater things, like justice for the oppressed? And a heart that is learning to love God?

Don't miss this implication here. Checking off boxes will always be easier than checking your heart attitude toward others and evaluating your love for God.

Adapted from David E. Garland, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke (Zondervan, 2011), p. 495

Hypocrisy is easier. You can focus on the little deeds you do, check them off: another perfect score, another spiritual A+ for me.

And all the while we're just becoming better hypocrites, focusing on the small successes in life while turning a blind eye to greater failures in life.

Number three:

Learn to value public commendation more than personal character.

Jesus says here in verse 43:

"Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces."

Luke 11:43

Go to the marketplace, which today means go to the mall and somebody comes up and tells you how much your Bible lesson meant to them; how much you helped their child; how wonderful you are at work or at school.

They just want to shake your hand because you are the greatest.

When you come into the synagogue, you're ushered to the best seats in the house.

In those days the coveted seats were in the front and those who were truly spiritual sat up front.

Actually, in the synagogue, a front row would be set up, behind the speaker's podium, but it would be facing the audience.

And that row of seats would be reserved for the most well-known religious leaders. Let me tell you, the synagogue had become a stage where Oscar-level performances were played out weekly. They're pious expressions and responses were on display.

Jesus now says in **verse 44**:

"Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."

Luke 11:44

In these days, to touch a tomb or accidentally walk over a grave to touch a roadside tombstone was prohibited by the law (Numbers 19) and anybody who did would be ceremonially unclean for seven days.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell, [Matthew](#) (Crossway, 2013), p. 689

And for good reason, this cut down on the potential spread of disease.

The belief had also been taught that a person could become defiled even if their shadow crossed a dead body or a grave.

Swindoll, p. 312

So, every springtime before Passover, the community made sure all the roadside tombstones or grave boxes/ossuaries were all painted white so that they could easily be seen and avoided.

Adapted from O'Donnell, p. 689

Jesus points at these Pharisees and says, "You are like **unmarked graves**," in other words, unsuspecting people bump into you—they touch your lives, your teaching, your influence—and you corrupt them, you defiled them. **Your influence isn't spiritual, it's shameful.**

Listen, a hypocrite will never help you become holy. They will never help you walk with God. They will only drag you down and corrupt you.

If you got a close friend that you're allowing to influence you, and you know good and well they're a religious hypocrite, let me advise you to run. Their influence is only going to defile you, not improve you. They will never bring you one inch closer to God.

What you need to do is hang around people who understand how much *they* need to depend on the Lord; how much *they* need forgiveness; how much *they* need to walk with Christ; how easy it is for *them* to be tempted to sin.

Be careful of those who are more interested in public commendation than personal character.

But if you'd like to stay open to the wrong influence and develop into an even better hypocrite yourself, do this instead; number four:

Be quick to teach others to do things you refuse to practice yourself.

Now I can imagine by now, this brunch has become stale; the quiche is cold, and anger is rising in this room—**verse 45:**

One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also." And he said, "Woe to you lawyers also!"

Luke 11:45-46a

Now understand these lawyers were the scribes, the attorneys of Mosaic and rabbinical law, experts at the law; and Jesus basically says, "I'm sorry, did I leave you out? Okay, lawyers—it's time for you to face the music as well!"

This lawyer's probably thinking, "Why did I raise my hand."

Verse 46 again:

"Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear ..."

Luke 11:46a

He's referring to religious rituals and traditions and rules placed on the lives of the people.

Hundreds of them!

For instance, it was unlawful for the Jewish people to work on the Sabbath, and that involved carrying a burden. So, the lawyers spelled out all kinds of rules for what constituted a burden.

These lawyers determined, during the days of Christ, that it was considered unlawful for someone to carry a burden in his right hand, or in his left hand, or on his shoulder—and I quote—but he who carries anything on the back of his hand, or with his foot, or with his mouth, or with his hair, is not a burden.

For some of us, hair has never been much of a burden!

If you think about their definition, according to these rules, you can smoke a pipe because you're holding that burden, so to speak, in your mouth; you can wear a hat, because that burden's on your hair, and you can wear sandals because they're on your feet. So, *they* do not constitute a burden.

But what about eating? Isn't lifting a glass or a spoon lifting a burden?

So, the lawyers had put their heads together and come up with the rule that it would be lawful to pick up water if it was no more than what you could fit inside 1 and ½ eggshells, so you want to keep those eggshells handy for measuring; *and* you could lift a spoon to your mouth if the food weighed no more than 1 fig.

Who can even remember the rules, much less keep them all?

However, the Lord doesn't stop there. He says here again in **verse 46**:

“For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

Luke 11:46b

You find loopholes; you get around it all; you're not measuring anything. You're not doing any of this stuff.

Reminds me of twin brothers, one became a minister and the other became a doctor. It was almost impossible to tell them apart. A man approached one of them on the street and asked, “Are you the twin who preaches?” and he said, “No, I'm the one who practices.”

Michael Hodgin, [1001 More Humorous Illustrations](#) (Zondervan Publishing, 1998), p. 167

This word Jesus uses for **burden** was used in **Acts chapter 27** for the cargo of a ship. An incredibly heavy burden that no person could bear.

John MacArthur, [Luke: Volume 2](#) (Moody Publishers, 2013), p. 104

This is what happens to you underneath this kind of burden: you sink. You sink into despair because you know in your heart of hearts that you can't measure up; you're drowning in your sin and failure.

Now we can understand that stunning promise of Jesus who said to the multitude, **“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ... Learn from me, ... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).**

Christianity isn't a burden of rules you'll never remember and never perfectly keep; it's a relationship with your Savior who died for every sin and every failure and every shortcoming.

The family of God is the only family where you can become a member by admitting you're a sinner and depending daily on the forgiveness and grace of God.

But if you want to become an even better hypocrite, here's another step to take, number five:

Admire people who can't challenge how you think or live.

Jesus says here in verse 47:

“Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs.”

Luke 11:47-48

The religious leaders were patting themselves on the back that they had built monuments to former prophets, while at the same time they were rejecting the testimony of the prophet John the Baptist.

And now—even worse—they were in the process of rejecting the greatest prophet in human history, the Lord Himself.

The only prophets they admired were dead, out of sight and out of mind.

Barclay, p. 158

J.C. Ryle commented on his notes on this text that it is so much easier to admire dead Christians than imitate living Christians. Those who can confront us and challenge us.

Adapted from J.C. Ryle, [Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke](#) (Evangelical Press, original printing 1879; reprint, 1975), p. 206

Because these Pharisees and scribes refused to listen to the testimony of history and their own personal rejection of true prophets, they had become false prophets.

They were actually hindering people from discovering the truth of the gospel. Jesus said as much to them here in **verse 52:**

“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”

Luke 11:52

In other words, you turned salvation into a book of riddles and puzzles nobody can figure out.

Adapted from Barton, p. 308

Here's a question a hypocrite will never ask himself or herself: "Is my lifestyle, my life, my testimony a stumbling block to others, or a stepping-stone to the truth of Christ?"

You want to become a better hypocrite? Never ask yourself that kind of question. Just be quick to tell everybody else how to live but never think about the fact that people are watching how you live.

Knowledge here in this context text is an understanding of the knowledge of Jesus and His gospel invitation.

Jesus effectively says to these scribes and Pharisees, "You should have put out a welcome mat and shown everyone how to walk through this door. But instead, you've attempted to lock the door and hide away the key."

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 315

What a fearful accusation.

Is your life a roadblock or pathway to people who need Christ?

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, [Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor](#) (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 212

Well, if you want to become a better hypocrite, and hinder the gospel, here's one final step to take—number six:

Whenever you are exposed to convicting truth, don't repent; resist.

We're told here in verse 53:

As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

Luke 11:53-54

In other words, the same old responses. Let's get mad at Him, let's try to trip Him up.

It's possible that at this point Jesus stood up and walked out and this crowd of angry men walked out after Him. How dare He speak to them like this, this unlettered Carpenter? How dare He confront them; attack their schools of thought, their revered rabbis, their religious traditions.

Who did He think He was?

I'll tell you who He was: He was the emperor who had called them all in to face the music.

They did everything but listen. and repent.

The mirror of the word shows us ourselves here.

How easy it is:

- To respond to convicting truth by resisting, instead of repenting.
- To admire people who can't challenge us on how we think or live.
- To quickly tell others to do things we don't do ourselves.
- To value public commendation more than personal character
- To applaud ourselves for small successes, while turning a blind eye to greater failures.
- To focus on external appearances rather than internal attitudes.

For the believer today, maybe you're wondering how long this battle with hypocrisy is going to be? How long will we need to stay alert and honest before the Lord and others?

Well, some of the Christians I most admire openly admit their battle for transparency and honesty.

I think of Steve Green, the musician, soloist, who at one point in his career was packing arenas for his concerts.

Several decades ago, he was being interviewed by a Christian journalist at a time when his name was a household name in the Christian community; and he said this, "My tendency is to only let people know enough about me to leave a good impression . . . the truth is I am a recovering hypocrite."

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1996/december/1504/html>

One of the most mature believers you will ever read is Paul, the apostle.

He writes to the Philippian church that he has not yet attained resurrection status, you could read that, "I have not yet arrived."

A hypocrite will tell you he's arrived. Paul says, "I haven't arrived yet." He goes on to say, I am not perfect or mature; I am not fully mature in Christ, yet.

I haven't arrived and I'm not as mature as I'd like to be. But I press on; I'm going to continue to walk with Christ.

That daily decision keeps you from going down that path to becoming a better hypocrite, and instead becoming a more dependent follower of Christ.

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