

I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About... *Hypocrites in the Pews*

Romans 7:15-25

August 25, 2024

"We are Taught to Hate Hypocrisy. We Shouldn't." That's the title of a recent essay by Lydia Polgreen. The piece begins with a personal story, an anecdote that had me nodding vigorously in recognition. The author describes that she once lived near a busy highway exit that had, in her words, a generous merge lane. Nevertheless, drivers would often cut in at the last possible moment, making the wait longer for everyone who exercised a little common decency and followed the rules. Polgreen recalls how she would descend into a rage over the inconsiderate, selfish drivers each time she took that exit headed home. She also confesses that her rage was tinged with a self-congratulatory smugness. *I would never do such a thing.* She continues, "Except of course I have, I do, many times, and doubtless will again...Just the other day I snuck off the highway with a quick, opportunistic swerve into a honking line of waiting drivers. I was in a hurry. What can I say? I'm a hypocrite!"

It's possible that you might relate. Now maybe your hypocrisy of choice is not aggressive driving (but maybe it is). My guess is you have one. I'll go next. I can be fierce and uncompromising in harsh assessment of those who are overly attached to their phones. I find myself rolling my eyes when I see people who seem distracted and disengaged from what is literally happening right in front of them IRL (In Real Life). Families out to dinner staring down at their devices rather than engaging in conversation with their loved ones. *Missing precious moments. I would never do such a thing.* Except I have. I do. More often than I care to admit, I catch myself doing the very thing I condemn. That's not quite true. Usually someone else catches me doing that thing. Usually one of our boys, after he has repeated a question three times and been given no response. "Dad! Look up! Listen to me!" What can I say? I'm a hypocrite.

In these polarized and tension-tinged times, it's perhaps the most pervasive polemic, particularly in public life. Polgreen calls ours the "golden age of allegations of hypocrisy." It has never been easier to compare the words and deeds of people we don't personally know. We live in an era of permanent records, and those records accessible to anyone with WIFI, offering (hear Polgreen's words again) "an all-you-can-eat buffet of human inconsistency."

The Christian movement has been at the tip of the spear in recent hypocrisy wars. The Church was once assumed immune from human judgment. Instead, the Church (or, more accurately, its leaders) *did* the judging. Our sacred texts describe high standards of ethical behavior and moral purity, standards that we have often been better at preaching than practicing.

And as that gap between words and actions was increasingly exposed, the reputation of religion (and, again, its leaders) had farther to fall than other institutions. And fall it has. Crash landing. To the delight of some and the horror of others. As a pastor, I hear the criticism often. Churches are filled with hypocrites. A hypocrite on every pew, and especially behind the pulpit, where they preach grace while practicing hostility. In this golden age, allegations of hypocrisy abound.

I am not here to defend those who twist the gospel into knots, trying to justify judgment that finds no basis in scripture or in the life of Jesus Christ. Those of us who are trying to be his followers must oppose such voices. But when we do, we must be spiritually mature enough to know and name our own brokenness, our own sinfulness, yes, our own hypocrisy. Friends, the demands of Christian discipleship are costly. They include sacrificing our self-righteousness: wagging the finger, pointing out

somebody else's inconsistencies, or perhaps worst of all, taking delight in the fall of another.

The Apostle Paul spent much of his life thinking about how life in Christian community works. Two thousand years later we must not construe his letters as grand detached dissertations intentionally designed to set the course of Christian theology for all of time. Not so. The epistles of Paul were written to small, struggling bands of newly formed believers who, like the apostle, had been transformed by an encounter with Jesus Christ and were struggling to understand what this might mean for how they should live their lives. They were trying to embody a new way of being together. Paul's letters provide encouragement and instruction for a fledgling movement in the shadow of the Roman Empire.

The letter to the Romans is written to such a community. Though Paul did not launch the church and had never visited its members, he knew their struggles because their struggles are human struggles. Among them was this: the congregation in Rome was made up of an odd mixed-up group of people. People from different backgrounds who had just recently held divergent perspectives on important—even essential—matters. A group of Jews and Gentiles who came from different backgrounds. Their traditions and their customs were radically different and often opposed to one another. How does Paul approach this divided congregation? Well, as a former high school debater, I am impressed with Paul's strategy here. At the outset, the apostle begins to enumerate a distinctly Gentile list of sins. He names them one by one, and he piles them on. You can almost hear the other half of the congregation, those who were faithful, dedicated followers of the Levitical law, applauding the bold preaching of Paul, enjoying this catalog of their neighbors' most unfortunate shortcomings. Things are looking good until, well, after Chapter One comes Chapter Two. And here, Paul's next move is to my mind his most brilliant. He shifts the focus from the sins of one group to the judgment of the other. He boldly announces that those who judge the sins of someone else are committing what they are condemning. Hypocrisy.

To make Paul's words particularly poignant for our time, imagine for a moment that you were in a group made up of both Democrats and Republicans. On second thought, you don't even have to imagine that! But let's imagine that I stood in this pulpit listing all the wrongs and the offenses, the sins and the shortcomings, of let's just say the Democrats. Those in the crowd who are of the other party might find yourselves feeling pretty good. Increasingly self-assured. Righteous even. Enjoying every moment as I catalog the shortcomings of your neighbors. Until after Chapter One comes Chapter Two. The language shifts. The preacher turns to our Republican folks and says, "By the way, if you have found yourself judging the other side, you are just as guilty as they are." You see how timely these texts can be!

Again, as a powerful preacher and persuader, Paul returns to this same topic in the seventh chapter. But this time he makes it personal. Before this group of believers, he confesses his own brokenness. With genuine exasperation, Paul acknowledges that he often falls short of what God intends, even when he knows to the core of his soul what that is. Sin dwells within. This pernicious trap is difficult to slip. What can Paul say? He's a hypocrite.

Many criticize and condemn the Church as an assembly of close-minded judgmental hypocrites. And you know what? They are right. We are a broken people, a dim reflection of the community we are called to be. And that is why, every week, we come together, and we admit how we have failed. We say that we are sorry. We lean on the grace we need to try it all over again. We challenge ourselves to be changed in time, to be renewed, to see what God sees, to love as Jesus loves. We know that this is a slow process. It will take longer than the sum of our years on earth because our humanity will always get in the way. We require the support of a community, the reconciliation and forgiveness that we receive when we freely admit that we are broken. But the joy that comes from this striving, the fulfillment that comes from living for something more than ourselves, is well worth the inevitable setbacks and failures. In time, we come to rely not on our own efforts but

on the unconditional love of a forgiving God. And perhaps we come to extend that love and grace and forgiveness to others as well.

According to Paul, the world itself has been turned upside-down by the radical love of God in Jesus Christ. This is no subtle change—something significant at the heart of reality has been utterly transformed, and we cannot live the way we did before we heard this gospel, this good news. We cannot go back to our old habits of gossip, division, cynicism, fear, judgment, hatred, and exclusion. No, we must care for one another. We must pray for one another. We must talk to one another. And perhaps most important of all, we must listen to one another. God forbid we ever become so puffed up with pride that we forget how to listen.

David French, who happens to be a colleague of Lydia Polgreen's from the other side of the ideological spectrum, recently wrote an essay titled, "Some Think What You Preach Matters More Than What You Do. It Doesn't." I think Paul would be cheering if he could read the final lines of the essay. "The American church is torn apart by conflict over theology. But it should be united by the pursuit of virtue. The church that truly influences a nation will be one that focuses on doing good more than on being right."

In the weeks ahead, could we try to make that shift at Second Church? Could we commit, covenant, to spend marginally less time pointing out somebody else's vice and just a little more time pursuing virtue?

Friends at Second, listen. Constantly seeking out the hypocrisy of others is a spiritually bankrupt downward spiral. Not because you'll be without examples—there's an endless supply of them—but because there will always be a hypocrite in the mirror. That's the one you are most able to influence.

So let's be honest about our failures. Let's be more forgiving of the failures of others. Even the ones who cut us off in traffic. After all, hypocrites are always welcome on the road of faith. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.