

Religious Hypocrisy

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Mark 12:28-34, 38-40

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

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A teacher of the law, a scribe, asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mark 12:28). Some fellow scribes actually went to the trouble of adding up all the laws contained in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. They came up with a grand total of 613 laws, 365 of which were written in the negative and 248 expressed in the positive.

Jesus answers by quoting the great Shema, a passage every faithful Jew knows by heart: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind” (12:29-30).

Jesus eclipses the scribe’s inquiry by adding another command to the mix from the book of Leviticus. “The second is this: love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18).

These two commands don’t originate with Jesus. They have been part of the Torah for centuries. Rather, Jesus is the first one to connect and prioritize them. Loving God and neighbor are matters of first importance.

Later, in Mark 12, Jesus returns to this matter of the

scribes. He warns people, “Beware of the scribes who love to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplace and occupy the choice seats in the synagogue and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses...” (12:38-40). The word “devour” means to eat up. These scribes are most likely eating up the assets of widows by charging exorbitant legal fees. Jesus says these scribes like to recite long prayers only to keep up appearances. In reality, the only praying they are doing is spelled p-r-e-y.

Widows belong to a special category of people in scripture that also includes orphans and strangers. God is concerned that these most vulnerable members of first century society receive justice and mercy.

Don’t you see the hypocrisy of it all? The scribes are taught in the Torah to love God and neighbor. Yet, here they are exploiting people under a pretense of love. Using religion to exploit people is hypocrisy of the worst kind.

The word “hypocrisy” originates from ancient Greek theater. In classical Greek comedy/tragedy, actors wore

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masks to express various moods and to play multiple roles on stage. A hypocrite was an actor who played a part.

I had no idea when we lined out this sermon series six months ago that we would be focusing on Mark 12 on the Sunday our leadership chose to address sexual abuse. The connection seems too coincidental to be coincidental.

Our former Student Ministries Director, Eric DeVries, admitted in 2005 that he was guilty of sexual misconduct. He used religion to prey on vulnerable students. He was forced to resign and was reported to Fairfax County Child Protective Services. He was originally charged with a felony, that of taking indecent liberties with a minor. As a result of a plea bargain, he was found guilty of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. He was given a one-year suspended jail sentence, with mandatory counseling.

In 2009, we revisited this issue in worship. What we initially thought was the abuse of a few students escalated to multiple students. I said that Sunday, that during the time Eric was employed here, he acted as a sexual predator. We also became aware that we were not caring adequately for the victims of Eric's abuse. This led to a ministry called NewSpring, to care for our students and educate our church.

Last November, a victim of Eric's abuse (we prefer the term survivor) spoke to our leadership. We learned the awful truth that this abuse was more destructive and pervasive than previously imagined. Ever since that fateful day, it's been the only topic of conversation on the Session agenda.

So, why are we talking about this abuse six years later? Our students were mid-adolescents when the abuse occurred. Some of them were initially reluctant to tell their story. Now that they are young adults, they are ready and able to tell the truth.

That's why we've moved the survivors and their families into the center of this discussion. A letter was sent to everyone on our mailing list on Friday. This letter has been written primarily from the vantage point of our survivors and their families. We rejoice that we have entered into a new phase of relationship with some of them.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we seek to know the truth and speak the truth. Churches who refuse to tell the truth about sexual abuse are a horrible witness to Christ in the world.

Evil likes to hide under the cover of darkness. It thrives in secrecy. Scripture declares, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5). God's light exposes darkness. We must be vigilant about shining the light of Christ's

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redeeming presence into the darkness. We don't simply want to apply more heat in the aftermath of this abuse. We must shine God's light into every corner of darkness.

We never imagined such evil could happen here. Now that it has occurred here, we have the opportunity to model what Christ calls us to do about it.

The Washington Post will write a feature story this week about what happened here. Sad to say, but abuse in churches is old news. This article holds forth the promise of a different story. We approached the Post to write this story cooperatively. Jesus said the truth will set us free. It might make us miserable for awhile, but it will set us free.

Our leadership has retained legal counsel to help in this self-examination process and so we don't become reckless about telling this story. No, we won't hide behind lawyers. No, the young women and their families don't have lawyers. There will be no legal rattling of swords. We seek restorative justice, not legal redress. Our goal is the full redemption of those victimized by this abuse.

Eric's hypocrisy is obvious to us now. He used religion as a pretense to devour students. Jesus pronounces a severe condemnation at the end of our lesson for those who feign love for devious purposes (12:40).

There were actually two harms that occurred in this

church. While Eric's harm is blatant, ours is more subtle. Let me speak for a moment to our survivors and their families. We, as church leaders, were part of the harm in failing to extend the compassion and mercy that you needed. Some of you felt uncared for, neglected and even blamed in this church. I am truly sorry. I apologize for not fully entering into your suffering and pain. I regret the harm this neglect has caused you.

Students and families active in our youth ministry at this time were also damaged by Eric's abuse. Some of these students left disillusioned and haven't been back. This profoundly saddens me.

Paul writes, "If one member of the body of Christ suffers, every member suffers with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). Let us bend low to hear their cry. Don't trust the rumor mill for your information. Honor them by praying for their redemption. Be respectful as you speak about this issue to one another and with them.

I've learned plenty about sexual abuse over the last six years. One statistic jars me: one in five women and one in ten men were abused as children. What a staggering indictment of the human race. If there are eight people seated in your pew this morning, one of you, on average, has been abused as a child. Some know this horrible truth up close and personal.

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We must tell the truth about sexual abuse in our church. We joke about sex and watch shows exploiting sex, but we don't talk seriously about sexuality in our church and culture. Scripture declares that our bodies matter to God. God doesn't only save souls; God saves us body and soul together. We want to lift up a positive, life-affirming ethic that is good news for our bodies as well as our souls.

The last six years have given me new appreciation for why the Bible holds love and justice together in creative tension. Love without justice is sweet sentiment. Justice without love is harsh and punitive.

We talk endlessly about God's love. Indeed, God is love. But God possesses other attributes alongside love. God is also just. In moments like this, we draw strength from the assurance that justice also flows from the heart of God. The prophet Micah says it best: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

People tell me the church is full of hypocrites. I agree! This church is full of hypocrites. But it's not as if God rounded up all the hypocrites in Northern Virginia and quarantined us at Vienna Presbyterian Church. There's no organization on earth that isn't full of hypocrites. It's in our nature to do things that we claim we would never do.

Over the past three years, we have been telling God's Big Story using three words: creation, fall and redemption. Creation—we are created to live in right relationship with God and each other. Fall—we fall out of relationship with God and each other through something called sin.

Sin is a Biblical word. It's taken from the world of archery and it means to miss the mark. Sin is not some private, little peccadillo committed somewhere in our college years. Sin means to miss the mark of what God intends for us.

The church is the only organization I know that requires for admission into its membership the acknowledgment that we are sinners. The church is not a museum for saints, it's a hospital for sinners.

The third word in God's Big Story is redemption. God, in Christ, seeks to redeem us from sin. Tim Keller says it well: "I am more deeply flawed and sinful than I ever dared believe but I am more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope."

The Post reporter asked, "What do you hope comes out of this story?" I talked about my hopes and dreams. But there is one dream I failed to mention. I dream in this public arena we now find ourselves that people will see Jesus Christ in us. We are not paragons of

virtue. We are deeply flawed people. We are also God's beloved ones. And this loving, just God wants to redeem every single part of our lives.

If God can redeem this sordid mess (and indeed He can!), God can redeem anything!

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

And this loving, just God wants to redeem every single part of our lives.