

I have some good news – and I have some bad news. The good news is that I only have 2 points! The bad news is that your homiletical torture will be just as long as usual! Today's gospel hits hard at us would-be practitioners of religion. It gets to the root of so many of our problems as disciples of Christ. So a word on judging others and the hypocrisy which is at the root of our judgments.

First, judging others. There is a legend in Marseille about a man called the 'miser.' Years ago, there was an old man who used to walk the streets of the French seaport town. According to the story, the miser loved nothing and no other object than to hoard every bit of money he got hold of. But no one ever knew what he did with the money. He was derided and hooted whenever he appeared on the streets of Marseille. When he died, the miser was so despised that only the priest and undertaker attended his funeral.

Following his burial, his will was read. In the document, the miser wrote that as a child he noticed that the poor of the city had great difficulty in obtaining water, that precious gift of God. What water they could get was dirty, often undrinkable. The miser vowed before God that he would live for one purpose, for one end. He would save all the money he could obtain and give it to the city of Marseille on the condition that it be used to build an aqueduct to bring fresh, pure water from a lake in the hills to the city. This was the miser's last will and testament. The aqueduct was built and is today one of the historic sights of Marseille. Guides still tell the story of the miser – the miser who turned out to be the savior of Marseille. (CONNECTIONS, February 3, 2002, p. 2)

Joan Chittister suggests that when we judge another, we are asking God to hold us to the same unattainable standards that we have set for the rest of humankind. (SEEING WITH OUR SOULS, p. 16) How quick we are to break off relationships with our children and friends and family members in order to punish them; we take delight in the execution of a murderer in the name of eradicating evil from society, and we destroy people's reputations with impunity in the name of truth and religion. Worse than that, we forget how really far we ourselves are from any kind of authentic holiness when we do these things. (adapted from Chittister, TWELVE STEPS TO INNER FREEDOM, p. 77)

One of the desert Fathers, Abba Xanthias said: "A dog is better than I am because a dog also has love but, unlike myself, the dog does not pass judgment." Which reminds me of the bumper sticker that says "May I become the person my dog thinks I am." Abba Sarmatas said: "I prefer a person who has sinned and knows that he sinned and has repented over a person who has not sinned and considers himself to be righteous." (Both examples taken from HOMILETICS, March-April 2003, p. 65)

But this little poem may well sum the issue of judgment up best:

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door,

Not by the beauty of it all, by the lights or its décor.

But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp –

The thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, the trash.

There stood the kid from 7th grade who swiped my lunch money twice.

Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.

Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in Hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.
I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal? I would love to hear Your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must have made a mistake.

And why's everyone so quiet, so somber? Give me a clue."

"Hush, child," said He. "They're all in shock. No one thought they'd see you." (Author unspecified, from DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2007)

Second, a few years ago there was a motorist in California whose license plate was the word 'Peace.' One day though, "after she tailgated a slow-moving pickup truck on a 2 lane canyon road, she pulled alongside the other vehicle, swatted at it with an aluminum baseball bat, and then threw a can of air freshener at it as she roared past." When a state trooper pulled the woman over, she explained that she was "in a hurry and getting frustrated." When the police officer then inquired about her license plate, she said that she had gotten it "because she thought there was too much violence going on in today's world." (LECTIONAID, March-May 2006)

What is the biggest criticism of the church today? "It's just a bunch of hypocrites." That is the secular perception. UNCHRISTIAN, a book based on the findings of a Barna research study, sought answers to the criticism. The authors, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, polled young adults outside of Christianity – those who may or may not ever engage our faith communities – about their perception of the church and Christians today. The title of the book comes from the sobering results – unchristians find us unchristian!

85% of young outsiders claimed that Christianity is hypocritical – saying one thing and doing another. Instead of being a voice against the image-is-everything mentality, outsiders believed that Christians worked just as hard as they did to preserve an image of strength and put-togetherness. Asked another way, 84% of those polled had a personal relationship with a Christian. Only 15% thought the lifestyles of those Christians were significantly different from the norm.

Another Barna research study confirmed that perception. A 2007 study showed that lifestyles of 'born-again Christians' were statistically equivalent to those of nonbelievers. When reporting activities from their previous 30 days, both groups were equally likely to gamble, view pornography, take something that didn't belong to them, physically fight or abuse someone, get drunk, use an illegal drug, intentionally lie, seek revenge, gossip, or cheat on a tax return.

We need to sit with that for a moment – NO STATISTICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE HABITS OF CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS. More statistics would just get more depressing. Just look at Catholic giving – we blow every other church out of the water with our lowest of the low giving. And we say that we are Catholic? Certainly not reflected in our giving. The point is clear: Hypocrisy is a valid critique of the church. What we say we believe does not equal how we behave. There's a huge gap between belief and practice.

So let's look at the antidotes to hypocrisy. Our computers have firewalls and virus scans. What attitudes and practices are the equivalent in church life?

1. *Small things can make a huge impact.* That's the costly message if a Trojan Horse virus invades our computers. And Jesus would go on to teach the same idea in the parable of the mustard seed and

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the yeast. We can never underestimate the huge impact our small choices can make on those who are linking their perception of Christianity with the way they see us living our lives. That means our mind-set needs to be radically missional. Every moment is potential evangelization:

--how we speak to and correct our kids in public; how we respond to our parents in public

--what we say about mutual acquaintances and friends

--how we tip – and how we tithe

--the way we engage or ignore the person checking our groceries

--how we respond to being cut off in traffic, especially if we have a fish or pro-life sticker on our bumper.

We don't need to worry about sharing Christ with others by engaging in heavy theological discussions. Our LIFE IS OUR MESSAGE! Even the smallest acts of our public life can be off-putting or magnetic regarding being a disciple of Christ.

2. *Choose authenticity.* Genuineness. Integrity. Transparency. People are tired of Sunday-only Christianity. If Christianity isn't true and transformative, then non-Church goers realize there are plenty of other things to do with their time. In the place of hypocrisy, many churches are going with honesty – publicly normalizing their corporate imperfection. In Austin, Texas, author and pastor John Burke makes transparent imperfection the rule, not the exception. His Gateway Church slogan is "No Perfect People Allowed." A Colorado church welcomes people each week with the phrase "You are accepted here...just as you are." In Las Vegas, Central Community Church says, "It's ok not to be ok." I like the song ALL ARE WELCOME for this very reason. But it's easy to sing the words – how good are we at actually BEING WELCOMING?
3. *Don't fight with Jesus when you agree with Him.* Does it strike anyone as a bit ironic that nonbelievers and Jesus share the same harsh opinions toward hypocrisy? That is a great entrée to any discussion with those who talk about the hypocrisy of church-goers. We need to tell them that Jesus agrees with them. We remind them not to let something they and Jesus agree on keep them from exploring faith.
4. *Apologize often.* Bumper-sticker theology is almost always wrong. Really wrong. But some well-intentioned souls get close when their cars tote the message: "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." The authors of UNCHRISTIAN offer another perspective for us: "Christians are transparent about their flaws and act first, talk second." We've had to apologize a LOT for the church lately. And we have truly HAD to. And we will continue to have to. Because we'll just never get it right. But we need to keep trying. And trying. And trying. Until our last breath. And not cheap excuses or phony apologies such as "I'm sorry for the way that you feel." But real, relational contrition – "I need to ask for your forgiveness." "I really blew it – I'm deeply sorry for how I have affected you."

The only perfectly safe computer is one that's turned off or disconnected from the Internet. In the same way, the only perfectly safe Christian is a dead one – unable to make the mistakes that might lead others to dismiss us as hypocrites. (adapted from HOMILETICS, July-Aug 2010, p. 65-67) We probably can't do any better than the advice that St. Augustine offered to his congregation 1600 years ago: "If you would spend more time in trying to make yourself what you want them to be, then you would have less time to be bothered by their not being what you suppose yourself already to be." Amen. (last section taken and adapted from HOMILETICS, July-Aug 2010, p. 65-67)