

Eight Ways to Be a Bad Christian

Convert People To A Legalistic Faith

Mathew 23:15

I want to continue this morning in our study of eight ways to be a bad Christian. I want to clarify for us this morning that as I speak about these topics, I am not merely talking about Christianity within these four ways of the building – I am talking about your life being lived in front of the public, your friends, your coworkers, and even those you simply live around. Being a bad Christian is not about behaving in church, but it is about being real and relatable to people in this world. In God’s eyes, your life is not compartmentalized. It is all interconnected.

That was one of the traps that the Pharisees fell into – compartmentalizing their personal lives, from their religious lives and image. Jesus clarified it for them, that it wasn’t about going through the motions, but it was about being emotionally connected with our hearts. It wasn’t about what it looked like on the outside, but inside that counted. The reason why we are looking at this topic is because we need to self-evaluate. We should always be self-evaluating so that we can maintain an edge and process of growth and maturity.

We have seen so far that bad Christians (1) Make Christianity a burden to others, (2) Serve in order to be seen by others, (3) Shut the door on people seeking grace, and this morning (4) Convert people to a legalistic faith. We find our text this morning in **Matthew 23:15**:

15 “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are!”*

I want to first start off with understanding what Jesus was accusing them of. He uses the term “**hypocrites**” which if you look up the definition **in the Greek means “an actor, or stage player, a pretender, an interpreter.”** Jesus was in essence saying, “you aren’t real, you are going through the motions and are playing out a great skit or play before men.” Do we see hypocrites in the church? Do we see hypocrites in this world we live in? Yet, I think we need to differentiate the difference between “willful hypocrisy” and “natural hypocrisy”.

1. Natural versus Willful Hypocrisy

Natural hypocrisy is within all of us. Paul even talked about it in **Romans 7:14-16**:

14 So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. 15 I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate. 16 But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. 17 So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

We struggle within ourselves between natural human nature and the divine nature that leads us to do what is right. We will always struggle with this part. But there is a difference when we talk about “willful hypocrisy”. It is a choice. We don’t fall into willful hypocrisy by accident, but it is something that is pursued.

There is a story of a man. He made free use of Christian vocabulary. He talked about the blessing of the Almighty and the Christian confessions which would become the pillars of the new government. He assumed the earnestness of a man weighed down by historic responsibility. He handed out pious stories to the press, especially to the church papers. He showed his tattered Bible and declared that he drew the strength for his great work from it as scores of pious people welcomed him as a man sent from God. Indeed, Adolf Hitler was a master of outward religiosity--with no inward reality!

The Pharisees struggled with willful hypocrisy. Even though they knew what they were doing was not right they still chose to keep the image of religion and ceremonialism. They still chose to maintain their own ideas instead of go to God for answers. They chose to remain stuck.

Although the church and world are full of hypocrites like you and I, our desire within the church needs to be God aimed. Yes, we will make mistakes but because of God’s grace we have the opportunity to make things right. We don’t set ourselves against God, we may struggle with him from time to time, but one who chooses willful hypocrisy chooses to oppose what God asks.

2. Leading People to Christ for the Wrong Reasons

The Pharisees were dead set against God and his Son Jesus Christ. Even though they claimed they were leading people to him, they were actually leading people unto themselves. **To the Pharisee converting others was about building their own little kingdom of disciples and followers.** That is why Jesus says in our text, “you cross land and sea to make one convert.” This term was a proverbial expression much like our expression, “you left no stone unturned”. You did everything you could to convert a person yet for the wrong reasons.

I have to admit that I have occasionally fallen into this trap myself. So often, we as **church leaders put so much emphasis on converts yet for the wrong reason. For some it may be the prestige that “God is alive in our church”, or for others it may be a measuring stick.** A bad Christian will simply make disciples and followers of themselves and not for God.

Can our motives be questionable sometimes when we try to share our faith with others? – maybe we do it for validation, or to show that we have the answer, or so others won’t think we are nuts, when the true goal is to lead them to Jesus and let him save them. You and I do not convert people, it is God who changes them, we just show them where to drink.

The Pharisees were more interested in making their own disciples and converts, than they were leading them to God. In fact in our text the term convert here is the same word “proselyte” which in the Greek meant “a new comer, a stranger, one who came over from a Gentile religion to Judaism. These converts were converted Gentiles.

3. Legalism versus Love of God

They were being converted into a legalistic religion based on rituals and ceremonies. They were being taught to that acceptance from God was based on keeping commandments, observing his laws – everything that had to do with their performance rather than on the free gift of God’s grace and forgiveness. In a book entitled, “Fan the Flame” the author writes:

In contrast to the two commands of Christ (love the Lord your God, love your neighbor as yourself), the Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws, 365 negative commands and 248 positive laws...By the time Christ came it had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness. As such, it contained at least ten tragic flaws. (1) New laws continually need to be invented for new situations. (2) Accountability to God is replaced by accountability to men. (3) It reduces a person's ability to personally discern. (4) It creates a judgmental spirit. (5) The Pharisees confused personal preferences with divine law. (6) It produces inconsistencies. (7) It created a false standard of righteousness. (8) It became a burden to the Jews. (9) It was strictly external. (10) It was rejected by Christ.

These Gentile converts many times became more passionate about their beliefs and the destruction of the Christian faith than their Jewish counterparts (The Apostle Paul being one of them). Heartless adherence to rules versus relational expression of love and gratitude – legalism versus love and liberty. Paul wrote in **Galatians 6:12-13**:

12 Those who are trying to force you to be circumcised want to look good to others. They don't want to be persecuted for teaching that the cross of Christ alone can save. 13 And even those who advocate circumcision don't keep the whole law themselves. They only want you to be circumcised so they can boast about it and claim you as their disciples.

Legalism is for show. It has nothing to do with the heart and has nothing to do with Jesus Christ.

A young man asked, “What must I forsake?” The response from the scribe was as followed:

"Colored clothes for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take

warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on his work."

Quaint, isn't it -- this example of extrabiblical scruples? And perhaps amusing. The list has constantly shifted over the 1,800 years since this one was actually recorded.

Jesus calls these new converts "twice the child of hell". Why? If you look at the word "hell" here it is the Greek word "geena" (gheh'-en-nah) which literally means "the valley of Hinnon, south of Jerusalem, but figuratively means "a place of everlasting punishment.

The valley of Hinnon was the place where filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned continually – like a garbage heap that was continually being consumed. It was considered the most horrific and despised place and the stench from the fires were overbearing. It was the worst of the worst.

The converts of the Pharisees were even more displeasing to God leading more and more away from God to man-made rules and regulations. Can we as Christians fall into the following three traps?

1. Willful hypocrisy – ignoring what we know is right and embracing the term Christian as a title rather than a description.
2. Working at converting people with the wrong motivation. Making them our disciple rather than a disciple of Christ.
3. Promoting a "works" gospel rather than one based on Christ's accomplishment for us – as if Jesus wasn't good enough or sufficient for us.

May we come after God and naturally fall as we struggle with our human nature and the new desires that God places within us. May we simply speak of the greatness of our God and let him draw people unto himself. May we never think that we have the ability to convert anyone. May our motivation be that of love for our fellow man and nothing more. And may we boast about Jesus Christ. Paul writes in **Galatians 6:14-15**:

14 As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died. 15 It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation.*

*30 God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. 31 Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord." **1Corinthians 29:30-31***

Bad Christianity converts people for the wrong reason and to the wrong message. The challenge is for us to be pure in motive and ready to speak the name of Jesus. Let's Pray!