

Have we forgotten how to warn? (Part Three)

Why was Christ such a relentless hunter of hypocrisy?

By Jay Wegter

A careful reading of the book of Matthew reveals that Christ continually pressed the contrast between genuine faith in God and hypocritical religion. In this article, we will explore why our Lord so relentlessly hunted down, and exposed religious hypocrites. The key word in ‘religious hypocrites’ is ‘religious’. That word is central to our premise, for when Christ was hunting hypocrites, He was exposing those who professed to be orthodox believers.

Christ did His ‘hunting’ by shining a brilliant light on the hypocrites’ rotten core. He utilized arresting word pictures—even outrageous descriptions which compared hypocrites to animal predators, stinking tombs, blind trail guides, pretenders, stumbling blocks, poison snakes, merciless ogres, noxious weeds, dirty cups, and fruitless trees.

The N.T. word, hypocrite is taken from the ancient Greek theater in which actors would speak from behind a mask in order to play a part. Thus, when used figuratively, a hypocrite is someone who is two-faced, a pretender, a person who disguises his real motives, someone whose profession does not match his practice.

Our Lord laid bare the modus operandi of the religious hypocrites of His day. They were attention-seekers; their religious activities were on display for all to see. Their acts of giving were very showy and public, designed to create the perception that they were righteous. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Mt 23:23).

These hypocrites appeared to be students of the Word of God who knew God, but they did not know Him. “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life” (Jn 5:39). They disguised their rapacious natures as religious guides who offered help to others in their religious quest. “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Mt 7:15). “Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Mt 15:14).

They ‘majored in minors’, selecting a few outward religious acts as a badge of spirituality while completely ignoring the true religion of heart and life which God commands.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mt 23:25-28).

They not only loved the praise of men, they were lovers of money and they used religion as a cover for their greed. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation” (Mt 23:14). “Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him” (Lu 16:14).

The inner life of these hypocrites was characterized by a heart alienated from God and filled with the love of sin. “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: this people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Mt 15:7-9). “But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man” (Mt 15:18-20).

They were scrupulous—they could spot the smallest flaw in others, but were willfully blind to immensity of their own sin. “Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:3-5). “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Mt 23:24).

They sought to build a following; they were not content to merely be regarded as righteous. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Mt 23:15). The Apostle Paul also targets their wolf-like character:

Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:26-30).

So why did Christ ‘hunt them’ down with such unflagging intensity? The answer is found in one of His descriptions of religious hypocrites—they are *stumbling blocks* (Mt 18:6-9). The Greek work for stumbling block is same root as our English word, *scandalize*. *Skandalon* (n.), *skandalitzo* (v.) (Greek). It is to put a snare or stumbling block in the way. In the N.T. it is always a metaphor of that which hinders right conduct or thought, i.e.—that which causes [someone] to stumble (Abbot-Smith Greek Lexicon, T & T Clark, 1994, pp. 407-408).

Hypocrites are a great offense to God not only because they profess to know God, but inwardly despise Him, but also because they hinder others from the way of salvation. “Woe to the world because of *its* stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!” (Mt 18:7). “So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send

forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:40-42).

Jesus is a relentless hunter of hypocrisy because of His love of His true sheep. He does not want them to stumble and be snared by a counterfeit form of religion. Hypocrites mislead those around them because their example is one of outward religion only. They are likened to ‘tares’ because they initially look like blades of wheat (genuine), but prove to be weeds which produce no edible grain (Mt 13:24-30). They can only propagate individuals like themselves—more tares (invasive weeds which resemble wheat).

In Jesus’ parable, it is significant that these hypocrites (tares) are ensconced in the church, but are false believers. It is shocking just how much they can resemble a real Christian. They will not be fully brought to light, identified, and condemned until Judgment Day, for Scripture says: “Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Mt 13:30).

They are weeds with nothing useful to harvest; they are fit only for burning, thus they resemble the ‘chaff’ described in Psalm one. [In contrast to the righteous, the Psalmist states:] “The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For, the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps 1:4-6).

Christ hunts down, exposes, and judges hypocrites because they are incredibly dangerous—they have a false testimony, a false set of priorities, and a false message. Therefore, they represent a serious threat. Hypocrites have accommodated religion to what the flesh is capable of—and then offered that spurious substitute as if it were the genuine article.

Hypocrites lack saving faith; they have merely assented to certain truth claims, but have never repaired to the Savior. As one missionary quipped, “There is a world of difference between accepting certain truths and accepting an actual Christ.”

Saving faith in the Son of God is above the power of nature. In other words, there is an infinite difference between ‘natural faith’ and saving faith. ‘Natural faith’ (what a man is capable of apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit) is sometimes called ‘empirical faith’. There may be a recognition of the facts of redemptive history (accepting the historical facts of Christmas and Easter), yet there is no divinely granted new heart (Ez 36:26).

True religion is above the natural powers of man. Over the last 2000 years of history the church has often forgotten that truth. When that happens, the gospel is been pushed down from its biblical description as “the power of God” (Rom 1:16-17)—and turned into something men are capable of performing (as if salvation is man’s prerogative).

The scriptural reality is that a mighty working of God’s sovereign power is needed in order for a person to become saved (Eph 1:19-20). 250 years ago Jonathan Edwards had this same concern in connection with the conversion statistics of a revival known as the “Great Awakening.” Edwards penned his concerns in his magnum opus, *The Religious Affections*. His

book is a masterful exposition of the marks of true salvation with particular emphasis placed upon the supreme mark of salvation known as the religious affections.

Edwards argued that true salvation must have a foundation that goes deeper than self-interest. Genuine salvation is characterized by a Spirit-engendered sight and savor of God's glory. Hypocrites lack this mark of salvation (an entranced vision of God's glory and character). Edwards presses his case stating that the truly converted man has seen Christ spiritually whereas the world has not seen Christ in this way (*The Religious Affections*, p. 23). Edwards stresses that the religious affections are the fruit of a new heart and that these affections are what moves the Christian life. Satan who plants tares/hypocrites (Mt 13:38-39) cannot counterfeit this sentiment; for no natural man sees God's glory and the creature's happiness woven together in Christ.

The outshining of the divine perfections and excellence are made sensible to us in Christ—or spiritually discernable in Him. This glory is a spiritual *savor* that satisfies the soul. But spiritually blind persons are not ravished by the historical facts of Jesus' life. Hypocrites do not experience what Edwards describes as, "The true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God and a conviction of the truth and reality of them thence arising." Thus, in the unregenerate person there is no perception of the spiritual beauty, treasure, and supremacy of Christ—no true comprehension of His fitted-ness to save, bring us to God, and make us like Himself.

Regarding the need for the work of grace in the conscience, J. C. Philpot observes; "Pulling down of all man's false refuges, stripping him of every lying hope, and thrusting him down into self-abasement and self-abhorrence, is indispensable to a true reception of Christ. No matter how informed his judgment is he will never receive Christ *spiritually into his heart* and affections, until he has been broken down by the hand of God in his soul to be a ruined wretch" (J. C. Philpot, *The Heavenly Birth and its Earthly Counterfeit*, Chapel Library, p. 4).

The Apostle Paul's own testimony of personal salvation also includes the revelation of Christ. "But when it pleased Him, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, in order that I might preach His Gospel among the Gentiles. . ." (Gal 1:15-16a). Spiritual eyes must be opened by a sovereign, fiat command of God, "Let there be light." Blinded persons might consider the facts of the gospel, but they do not see compelling spiritual beauty. The beauty of God's glory is beyond the powers of natural sight and sense. A new faculty of soul is needed ('spiritual eyes and ears'—Matthew 13:16).

Many today believe in the historical Jesus who are ignorant of the character of God. Only with the Spirit's planting of a new faculty, (a new capacity) will there be a savor for the glory of God which makes a man willing to 'sell all' for Christ's sake. Only regenerate individuals have the Spirit-enabled savor of divine glory. The sight of this glory kills the love of the world (and its idolatrous addiction to idols). "Nature may have a superficial knowledge and illumination of the Savior. The natural man may be active and do something for Him. But to love the cross, to suffer with Him, to follow Him through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha as He stoops dumb before His shearers so that your spirit feeds on His flesh and blood and humiliation *is a work of God's Spirit in you.* The natural man may have His emotions stirred by

Christ's passion, but only the true saint is acquainted with Christ in his spirit so as to *feed* upon his Substitute" (Edward Morgan, *The Life and Times of Howell Harris*, p. 239).

"If you only know Jesus by no more than the world knows, than the learned among men know, you have not the real blessing. If you only know the Lord of Glory by what you have found out yourself, in reading or in talking to others, unaided by the Father's drawing power, you are not blessed with true salvation. The true children of God have been made humble. They confess their total dependence upon the grace and mercy of Christ, and place their entire confidence and faith in His meritorious righteousness and shed blood" (W. F. Bell, "Do you know Christ by personal revelation?" -- Chapel Library).

Thomas Boston indicates that the man or woman called of God cries out in his soul, "Give me Christ or I die." "I am willing to sell all to have Him" (Matt 13:44-46). And once you have Him as Savior, you are convinced of your special interest in Him and His righteousness. None truly believe until by the Spirit it is plain to them and are thus persuaded by inward illumination (Rom 8:16).

By contrast, the 'pseudo-faith' of the hypocrite can look very convincing. It can appear passionate, persuasive, and even have its own form of confession and repentance (Shane Haffey, "Natural vs. Divine Faith," p. 1). Here are some of the characteristics of natural or pseudo-faith:

- It buries its counterfeit nature in outward religious activities.
- It elevates itself in false piety, hiding personal sin behind external 'righteousness'.
- It seeks the glory of its host rather than the glory of Christ.
- It is impenitent, suppressing and searing the conscience of its host.
- It refuses the command in the Word of God to practice self-examination.
- It seeks false security in self-righteousness (Ibid, pp. 1-2).

Sin is like no other malady. It hides its deadly symptoms from its perpetrators. It desensitizes its vileness to those who practice it. Its passing pleasure has diminishing returns. It becomes habitual, enslaving, and conscience-numbing. It's the default manner in which the human race seeks to meet its needs. It comes with a set of self-justifiers. It creates an aching void in those who practice it, inviting more indulgence in an attempt to fill that vacuum. It offers independence, but produce damning bondage to the evil one.

Sin's deception is truly horrific. For, when a man's faculties are at sin's disposal, Satan is at the helm of that soul. In that condition, the devil carefully pilots the man's soul into the mouth of hell. One of Jonathon Edwards most terrifying sermons is titled, "Sinners in Zion Tenderly Warned." Says Edwards of Isaiah 33:14, "There are two kinds of persons among God's professing people, the one, those who are truly godly, spoken of in the verse following the text; 'He that walks righteously, and speaks uprightly.' The other kind consists of sinners in Zion, or hypocrites." When judgment comes, fearfulness will surprise hypocrites.

Edwards states that, "God will by the destruction of ungodly men, manifest His glory very publicly, . . . God will execute wrath upon ungodly men, in such a manner as extraordinarily to show forth His great and mighty power. The destruction and misery of the wicked will be so

dreadful, that it will be a manifestation of the omnipotent power of God, that He can execute such misery. . . ‘The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? (Is 33:14)’” (*The works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:201).

If we are to faithfully follow the example of Christ in exposing the vileness and danger of hypocrisy, then we must warn by admonishing boldly. Anything less would involve coddling hypocrites in the congregation. That we cannot afford to do. Because, when hypocrisy is unchecked it is devastating to a church because of its tacit approval of formalism, impenitence, complacency, and presumption (Haffey, p. 3).

A believer who is serious about imitating his Savior will seek to stir his brethren out of indifference. It has been said, people used to go church to discover what they needed to repent of, now they go to church to improve their lives. What a stark contrast! Repenting of specific sins involves a determination to mortify those sins and cut off all occasion to make a provision for them. A faithful pastor and a growing Christian, like a sharp shooter will zero in on all the hiding places in which sin seeks to conceal and camouflage itself (Haffey, p. 2).

It is by admonishing one another in true fellowship (Rom 15:14) that we are protected from the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13-14). Hypocrisy involves a yawning chasm between profession and practice. What is on the outside is radically different than what is on the inside of a person’s life. In the Body of Christ, we need to exhort one another to ‘close that gap’ between truth and life; between faith and practice. Here are some of the steps in closing that gap: practice self-examination by the Word of God (Ps 139:23-24), join your repentance of sin to the mortification of sin (Col 3:5), replace the deeds of the flesh with the garments of grace (Col 3:8-17), put on, or clothe yourself with Christ (Gal 3:27) and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts (Rom 13:14).

Among those who claim to walk with the Holy One, there must be a very discernable echo of holiness in their lives (1 Pet 1:13-19). How we need to dwell upon the truth that heaven is a Person as well as it is a place (Rev 21:1-7). The Puritans frequently cautioned their hearers about the necessity of personal holiness with words like this: *you still have a hell to avoid and a heaven to gain. If heaven is not your main business here, you will not be found in heaven. Those who do not walk with God as His saints on earth will not be with Him as His saints in heaven.*

These exhortations can sound ‘grace-less’ to our ears because we hear so few sermons on the necessity of perseverance. In addition, we tend to define grace as a ‘commodity’ we now possess, rather than a relationship with the Holy One—therefore we reason that we can relax and let go of strictness in our Christian lives. As one man said, “My ticket is punched; I’m good.”

Scripture warns that impenitent hypocritical ‘Christians’ will not enter the Kingdom of God. What is riveting about this stern warning is that it is given in a context of grace.

Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and *there must be no* filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting,

which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Eph 5:1-6).

Our greatest weapon against hypocrisy is a proper Christology—a biblical view of Christ's majesty, Lordship, Person and work (Rev 12:11). He is the Judge of His churches. He walks among the lampstands. He trims the wicks and gives oil to the churches, and in some cases, He snuffs them out (removes their lampstand). His eyes are as flame of fire (Rev 1:12-18). He disciplines those He loves, deepening their obedience (Rev 3:19). He carefully selects the trials necessary to preserve, purify, and subdue His people to Himself (Haffey, p. 4).

The response of faith to the pre-imminent Christ is always consecration. With consecration comes genuine hope in the Savior. Scripture calls us to test our hope to be sure it is right and cannot disappoint us (2 Cor 13:5). Here is a test of genuine hope by Philip Henry, father of Matthew Henry: How is your hope wrought? If it was born at the same time you were, it is suspect. The foundation of good hope is laid in a kind of despair—there is no hope in the way that I am. I must have a better foundation, Christ alone. A genuine hope shows a constant care to please God and a fear of offending Him (Acts 26:7; 2 Cor 5:9). A true hope leads to self-purifying (1 Jn 3:3). Hope produces love to the Lord Jesus (2 Cor 5:14-15). Those possessing a solid hope renounce their own righteousness and exalt Christ as the source of their right-standing (Phil 3:9) (Philip Henry, *Christ All in All*, Reiner Pub., 1976, p. 61).