

10 Hard Questions

“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

“be ready in season and out of season...”
(2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)

Aren't Christians Really Just A Bunch Of Hypocrites?

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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Introduction:

Well good morning church! It is so good to be with you again today! I'd love for you to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 1:1-9.

We've been talking about apologetics for the last 8 weeks or so. We are doing that on the assumption that on the other side of this pandemic there will be a unique opportunity to speak to our friends and loved ones about Jesus.

Today we are dealing with the objection:

But Aren't All Christians Really Just A Bunch Of Hypocrites?

When your friend says that, he or she is really saying: I don't have to deal seriously with what you are saying about Jesus because the people of Jesus are an absolute, unmitigated disaster. If he was who he says he is then they wouldn't be who they clearly are.

That is a VERY COMMON objection raised against the Gospel in our culture - so how are we going to handle that?

What I'd like to do today is begin with a walk through the Corinthian Correspondence. The church in Corinth was massively dysfunctional. There was a HUGE GAP between who they were and how they were behaving – so if we are going to learn about what hypocrisy is and how we ought to deal with it – then it makes a fair bit of sense for us to start here. We'll dip in and out of the 2 letters that we have and then use this narrative as a resource for thinking about what to say and what to do in response to this objection.

So hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1 of chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians:

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:1–9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

The Church In Corinth: A Case Study In Hypocrisy?

I love what David Prior says here, he says:

“If the first nine verses of this letter were excised from the text, it would be impossible for any reader to come to anything but a fairly pessimistic view of the church at Corinth.”¹

¹ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove. Bible Speaks Today-NT: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 23.

And of course, that's exactly right. When you read the rest of the letter it is clear that this church is a rolling tire fire. The men in the church were sleeping with prostitutes. The women in the church were dressing like men and intentionally obscuring their gender. The Lord's Supper was an absolute gong show. It was so bad actually that Paul said that it would be better if they just stopped doing it all together. And they were obsessed with certain spiritual gifts to the point of silliness and distraction. Some of the members were coming to church on Sunday and then worshipping pagan idols throughout the rest of the week – we presume for political or economic advantage. And then to top it all off, one of the members of the church was actually living – carnally - with his father's wife. True story. The brother seduced his father's new wife and took her into his own bed. It was an unmitigated disaster – and the leadership of the church thought that they were being like Jesus by NOT disciplining all these people who were sinning. They thought that since Jesus was merciful – they should be merciful. They should just not judge and let everybody do their thing.

And Paul was about to lose his mind. He said:

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. (1 Corinthians 5:2 ESV)

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:6–8 ESV)

Scholars suggest that it was probably close to Passover when Paul wrote this letter – and so he is calling on a bit of well-known Passover imagery. Just before Passover in Jewish homes, the mother of the house would lead the children on a meticulous search for crumbs and dirt and anything else that might contain even the smallest hint of yeast. They would gather up all the crumbs and throw the whole lot out the front door into the street – and only then – with the house cleansed – would they be ready to eat the Passover meal as a family.

That's what Paul is saying here! He is saying – you Corinthians need to start kicking some people out of your church! You've got some people who have been ROLLING IN BREADCRUMBS –

and they are just sitting there with you at the Lord's Supper – our Passover – they are just like a giant Corn Dog at the Table Of The Lord and nobody says a peep. What is the matter with you people? Cleanse out the old leaven so that you may become a new loaf. A new bread. A new body. A new people unto God in Christ.

That's what he says.

Now, he wants to be very careful how they apply this, so he circles back and he says:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:9–13 ESV)

So Paul is clear here. He says: “I am not saying that you can't hang out with your pagan, prostitute sleeping with neighbor, ok? I am saying that you can't take the Lord's Supper – you can't permit someone to CALL THEMSELVES A CHRISTIAN who is sleeping with prostitutes. You have to insist on DISCIPLINE and moral conformity within the church. So if someone refuses to let go of their sin – you need to remove them.

You need to:

“Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:9–13 ESV)

Again – this is so hard for us to wrap our heads around – and so open to misinterpretation so Paul actually hits this again in the next chapter. He says:

⁹ Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of

you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–11 ESV)

So obviously many of the true believers in the church of Corinth had been all of those things. They had been sexually immoral people. They had been idolaters. They had been adulterers. They had been practicing homosexuals. They had been thieves. They had been greedy. They had been drunkards. They had been slanderers and haters. They had been liars and cheaters. And Paul is saying clearly – such people will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But you aren't those people anymore.

You were washed.

That is no longer your identity.

That came out in the wash.

That was buried in the bleach.

That was cleansed by the blood.

That's not who you are.

You were washed.

You were sanctified – sanctified means to be set apart. To be identified for new and better things. It means set free and put on a different path.

You were justified. Justified means given a new and intimate status before God. You're not a rebel anymore, you are a beloved son or daughter of the King.

That's who you are and a great deal of biblical ethics is simply about the process of BECOMING who you are – of learning to behave like a son or a daughter of the King.

And that can take some time. Paul understood that. He said to these same people in a subsequent letter:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17–18 ESV)

Are you hearing what Paul is saying there?

He is saying IF YOU HAVE THE SPIRIT – then you are set free. You are not OBLIGATED to behave in the same way you used to. You are ABLE NOW to become who you are. You are ABLE NOW to behave in new and more appropriate ways. So we aren't going to encourage people to keep living in the ways of the past. No we're going to encourage people to move forward into their new identity as sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ.

This is going to happen slowly – but it is going to happen EVERYWHERE the Spirit is truly present. If people are truly saved they will MOVE FORWARD into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. Slowly but surely. By one degree of glory to the next.

That's what Paul says to this massively dysfunctional church in Corinth. That's how he deals with their sin, confusion and immaturity – but how does that help us answer this particular objection that is so often raised by our friends and loved ones?

Well I think this story suggests 3 things that we MIGHT SAY and 4 things that we MUST DO in order to respond to this suggestion that all Christians are basically hypocrites. Let me walk you through them.

3 Things We Might Say In Response To The Charge Of Hypocrisy:

In terms of the things we might say, I think it might be helpful to begin with this:

1. Being a Christian is not about being perfect, it is about being in process

Again, look at what Paul said in the passage we just quoted:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

So it's a process! And apparently a fairly long and slow process because there are many degrees between my present character and Jesus' perfect righteousness – so this is going to take a while!! Which is why, Paul identifies a very distant finish line. He says in chapter 1 that given what God has supplied and given how committed he is to their progress, the Corinthian believers can count on being:

“guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:8 ESV)

The Apostle John said the same thing.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 3:2–3 ESV)

So when will we be just like Jesus? When will we be guiltless? When will we be immune to the charge of hypocrisy?

When we see Jesus – which happens after we die or when Christ returns to the earth.

Which is why, the only perfect Christian is a dead one and that's why the Apostle Paul said to his people:

“do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes” (1 Corinthians 4:5 ESV)

Most of the people we call hypocrites at all – they’re just people in process. They are just weak, immature believers in the early part of God’s plan. So be patient, be gracious – and don’t judge before the time.

The second thing it might be helpful to say is this:

2. Not everyone who says they are a Christian actually is

Obviously that was the situation in Corinth – Paul had to tell them:

“Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:13 ESV)

There are always wolves among the sheep and so sometimes the person being called a hypocrite isn’t a hypocrite at all - they are an imposter and they need to be discovered and removed from the fold.

By the way, this is why membership and the Lord’s Supper are so important.

It is so important that we be as clear as possible as to who we are affirming as Christians and who we are not.

That’s what membership is! Membership is us saying: We’ve checked out Joe and he is the real deal. He’s a brother. He’s a believer.

And then every time we pass the plate to Joe during the Lord’s Supper we are saying: “We continue to credit Joe’s profession of faith in Christ. Joe is a brother. Joe is one with us in Jesus Christ!”

And that’s why when we kick someone out of the church – we call it “excommunication”. The word means “away from communion”. That’s what it is. An excommunicated person can still come to church and sing the songs and hear the Gospel – but they can’t take communion because we can no longer CREDIT THEM as an actual Christian.

So we need to do a better job with this – but in terms of answering the objection that all Christians are hypocrites; it might simply be helpful to remind your friend, that even Jesus said that not all people who say they are Christians actually are.

Matthew 7:21:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21 ESV)

According to Jesus there is a bit of an obedience test here. If someone says they are following Christ but they do not DO the will of the Father, then they are lying.

Plain and simple.

Not everyone who says that they are a Christian actually is – your friend should know that.

And then thirdly, and this is really important, you might want to remind your friend that:

3. Christianity is ultimately about trusting in Jesus, not in the people who are following him

There are no perfect people other than Jesus. No matter who you are looking at – if you look close enough you are going to see a sinner. You are going to see somebody who is going to let you down – unless you are looking at Jesus.

I hope there is no one here today because of Paul Carter. Let me tell you this: Paul Carter is a sinner. Paul Carter is a gutter rat that was shown mercy by a generous and mysterious God. Listen, I am trying to act more like a son of God every day – but I was born way far off in the dark, so I’ve still got an awful long way to go as a Christian. If you look at me you will be disappointed. And that goes for absolutely every Christian leader that I know.

At the end of the day it’s not about me; and it’s not about your mom, it’s not about your dad, or that friend you had at your old job, or that mean pastor you knew back in the 80’s. None of those people died on a cross for you. None of those people can offer you grace. None of those people

can save your soul, transform your character or guarantee your eternal destiny. So stop looking at them and stop using them as an excuse for why you will not entrust your life to Jesus.

I think you need to say that to your friend or your loved one – because not following Jesus because a lot of his followers are weak, immature and imperfect people makes about as much sense as not trusting your doctor because all the people in his waiting room are terribly sick.

That's kind of the point!

Your friend should come to Jesus because he is good – not because we are good – because, of course we're not. We're sick too. Put your mask on and sit down. The doctor will be with you shortly.

So those are a few of the things I think it might be helpful to say to a friend who raises that kind of objection.

But even more important than what we might say, there are a few things that we could do that might make this objection less common and less effective as a defense against the Gospel – let me walk you through them.

4 Things We Must Do To Avoid The Charge Of Hypocrisy:

The first thing we can do is this:

1. Confess our sin and depravity

Christians sometimes worry that if they ever admit to having a weakness or a struggle it will somehow negatively impact their witness – but the opposite is true. It is when we PRETEND to be something we are not – when we pretend to be fully sanctified – that is when we truly deserve to be categorized as hypocrites, so the simple solution to that is to be open and honest about our sin.

Tell people that you are a sinner who has been saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ! Tell people that you are in process. Tell people that you still have besetting sins that you continue to wage war upon every day of your life. The Apostle Paul talked like that. He said:

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24–25 ESV)

Did you hear that? Who WILL deliver me? Paul was a wretch in process – if he could say that, you can say that. You can tell people that Jesus is still working on you - thanks be to God!

That leads us to our second thing. You can tell people you are in process – and then; if you do that, you better let them see your progress.

2. Let everyone see our progress

If you just sit there in your sin – that isn't much of an advertisement for the Christian faith. You need to show them the power of Jesus through the gradual transformation of your character. Paul said that to young Timothy; he said:

Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. (1 Timothy 4:15 ESV)

Your growth is a great argument for the power and reality of Jesus. So stay someplace long enough and live your life transparently enough that people around you will see your progress and give glory to God in Christ.

The third thing we can do here is necessary but difficult. We need to bite the bullet and commit ourselves to the practice of internal discipline and judgment.

3. Practice internal discipline and judgment

If we look at the Corinthian correspondence as a whole it is clear that Paul was VERY QUICK to show mercy to ANY CHRISTIAN who confessed and repented of their sin. Interestingly, in the

letter that we call 2 Corinthians – obviously the congregation has begun to practice church discipline. But as is so often the case, they appear now to be in the ditch on the other side – they’re become too strict!! too strict. They put somebody out of the church – and refused to restore them when they repented. They were going to let him stew and Paul says no! If they repent, then, you’ve got to forgive and forget. So he says:

“you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Corinthians 2:7–8 ESV)

Paul wants them to understand: punishment is not for repentant sinners. It’s not for people who make a mistake and confess it – punishment is for those who won’t call it a mistake – who won’t name it as sin and who refuse to turn away from it. That’s the issue. That’s where punishment needs to be applied – there and only there.

David Prior again is helpful here, he says:

“One **persistent, flagrant sinner** who remains accepted without discipline within the Christian fellowship taints the whole body. Just as the Jews had to celebrate their deliverance from bondage with no leaven, so Christians must continually celebrate their deliverance from sin without any compromise with the very things from which they have been set free. Otherwise, the whole worship and community-life of the Christian church becomes a charade, full of insincerity and falsehood.”²

Listen – if we have persistent, flagrant sinners being received and recognized as Christians in this church – partaking in the Lord’s Supper and being acclaimed as members by this body – then we deserve to be called hypocrites. We are hypocrites! We are lying about the reality of that person’s Christian profession. We are calling something real that is obviously false – and that needs to stop. If we’re doing that, then our friends and loved ones are going to keep raising this objection and we are going to be powerless to push back against it.

For the good of that sinner, for the witness of the church – and for the honour of Christ in this community, we need to practice internal judgment and discipline.

² David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove. Bible Speaks Today-NT: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 77.

And then lastly, the most important thing we can do in the face of this common objection is to keep our focus as a church squarely on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

4. Keep the focus squarely on the person and work of Jesus

Paul was concerned with the tendency in this congregation at Corinth to over identify with human leaders – even good human leaders. Some were saying: I follow Apollos! Others were saying: I follow Paul. And Paul said:

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” (1 Corinthians 3:5 ESV)

He uses the word *diaconos* here. Pastor Levi spoke last week about how Paul often referred to himself as a slave – a *doulos* – and that’s true. When Paul wanted to emphasize his loyalty to Christ he used the word *doulos* – but here he wants to emphasize his role and function so he uses the word for “waiter” actually. He says, if you go to a restaurant and you really like the food – do you complement the waiter or the chef? I didn’t make this. I’m not the author of your salvation – I’m just the monkey who carried the tray from the kitchen to your table.

Don’t look at me.

Look at Jesus.

You know maybe if the church didn’t try to turn her pastors into celebrities we wouldn’t be so devastated every time one of those celebrities revealed their humanity.

Brothers and sisters, we’re just monkeys. We’re just gutter rats who’ve been given bread and life and hope and grace by a merciful Savior. We are servants through whom you have believed.

So don’t look at us – look at Jesus.

He is Good.

He is beautiful.

He is enough.

And in his mercy – he is here. Thanks be to God. Pastor Jody, will you come and lead us?