

## Session Ten: Why the Great Faith Exodus? 3

### Let's talk Christians and hypocrisy in a woke culture...

Christians don't always have the best reputation, especially among our next generation children and grandkids.



We've been described as judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, too political, boring, and insensitive ([The Rise of the Nones, 2014](#)). The Barna Research Group conducted a nationwide survey of those born between 1998-2015 to discover why so many are either *nones* (they have no religion) or *done's* (they're through with religion). 15% of U.S. high schoolers claim to be atheists, ([Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z](#)) joining

the 45% of Gen Zs who identify as *nones* or *done's*. 60% of Gen Zs don't even have God or religion on their radar.

There are a lot of reasons for this next generations exodus from churches, but Barna Research discovered the top three. Coming in at number two is Christians are hypocrites. Is this perception accurate? Or even fair? Maybe not. But it doesn't matter. Perceptions are more powerful than reality.

We can get defensive. We can excuse our faults, shrug them off, or go into a fetal position of guilt and despair. Or, we can put on our big boy or big girl pants and own a perception that Christians are hypocrites. Best of all, we can do something about it. First, wherever we are guilty of hypocrisy, we can stop being hypocrites and own up to it.



Second, we can dialogue with our next generation loved ones about this issue to remove one more stumbling block to Jesus.

### **There is good news that gives us a leg up with Gen Zs.**

"The demise of Christianity among younger people is greatly exaggerated," said David Kinnaman, the CEO of Barna Group in a recent interview with *Christianity Today* ([study: Gen Z Wants to Know More About Jesus](#))



The Barna Group recently completed the most extensive research in its 38-year history, surveying more than 25,000 teens, ages 12-17. They discovered that the majority had positive things to say about Jesus, and six out of ten want to know more about him. Maybe that's why a large percent of the half billion viewers of the *Chosen* film series are Gen Zs. You may not be able to drag them to church, but there's a good chance they'll talk about Jesus. So, start with Jesus when you talk about Christians and hypocrisy.

#### **1. Nobody struggled with religion more than Jesus.**

Begin by asking them to describe their feelings about Jesus. Probe what they know factually about him. Somewhere in that dialogue, when it is appropriate, tell them Jesus was righteous, but not churchy. He hung out with outcasts and misfits, the bad boys and girls that religious types excluded: foul-mouthed fisherman, Antifa-like revolutionaries, barroom brawlers, shady ladies, gangsters, and prostitutes.

If he came to your campus, he would sit in the school cafeteria next to punk kids with purple hair, tattoos, and body piercings. Or hang with gays, lesbians, trans kids, nerds, geeks, dweebs, gangbangers, rebels, radicals, loners, and even jocks, cheerleaders, and preppy mean girls. Jesus included everyone in his circle of friends. No one was too far out or far gone for Jesus to exclude them in his posse.



Sure, you would find him in a house of religion on holy days. But, he didn't suck up to religious types. You never saw Jesus get upset with



gangsters and prostitutes, but he went ballistic when pious bigots played their religious games. It got under his skin when they were exclusionist, judgmental and hypocritical toward his nonreligious friends. More than once, he got so ticked he overturned furniture in the temple, and drove out the religious phonies with a whip. In the end, he became

a clear and present danger to the religious establishment. So, these haters orchestrated his crucifixion. Jesus and religion never got along.

It wasn't that Jesus was against honest worship. He was God in the flesh. He invented real worship so that the people he created could enjoy him. He wanted authentic relationships. But religious types perverted true worship into stale religion with manufactured rules, regulations and traditions. They turned houses of worship into good old boys clubs that excluded people who didn't conform their phony rulebooks. Religion too often became fake instead of faith.

So, Jesus taught his disciples something radical called *church*—a community where everyone was welcome, where people could be real with each other, and feel free to express doubts and share struggles without being put down. Church would be a place where people could find God, grow in Jesus, and worship him freely. Church was supposed to change the world for the better. But somehow, over the past 2,000 years, too many churches have turned into the sort of religious country clubs Jesus hated when he was on earth.



So, if you struggle with what's wrong with religion, and want no part of what you see, you are on the same page with Jesus. You and he have more in common than you think. **[Note:** This may seem like strong stuff to church-loving grandparents, but the point of this unvarnished conversation is to help them identify with the real Jesus, and to draw

them ever closer to him and his gospel. The endgame is to lead them to a personal relationship with our Lord. Once they are born again by the Spirit, and Jesus is in them, he will take care of the church issue.]

## **2. No one hated hypocrisy more than Jesus.**

Jesus practically invented the word *hypocrisy*. A short walk from Jesus' boyhood town of Nazareth was the Israeli city of Sepphoris. Many scholars think that his mother, Mary, was born there. In that city was a theater where Greeks and Romans staged plays. The Bible doesn't say for sure, but maybe Joseph the carpenter went there to work on the stage and sets. Perhaps Jesus tagged along. Surely, they went there to visit Mary's relatives.

Could it be that at Sepphoris Jesus got ideas about hypocrisy? The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word *hypokrites*—a combination



of two words meaning "to speak from underneath or behind." It was used for actors who spoke from behind masks. In Greek plays, actors would change character by holding up new masks on sticks in front of their faces. The word *hypocrite* literally morphed into "the mask wearer" or "pretender."

There's a common expression in Hollywood: "Actors are people who get paid obscene amounts of money to pretend to be someone they're not." Perhaps, as Jesus grew older, he began to apply what he saw at the theater to all people, but particularly religious folk. We have all played the part, put on a show, worn a happy face, or photoshopped an image to make ourselves look better on social media.

Jesus understands why we do it. It's as old as Adam and Eve putting on fig leaves so their shame wouldn't be exposed. But Jesus wants us to be real and honest—with God, ourselves and others. So, what are hypocrites? They are actors, playing a part and pretending to be someone they aren't. For them, life is a show.



Like actors on the stage, they play to the crowd. They live for the affirmation and applause of others.



Jesus had his harshest words for religious hypocrites. In Mark 7:6, when religious leaders started judging his disciples, Jesus shot back at these haters, “[The Old Testament prophet] Isaiah was right when he



prophesied about you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’” In Matthew 15:7, he said this about them: “They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.” In Matthew 6:2,

he observed that hypocrites only live to look cool to others. In Luke 6:42, he said hypocrites were quick to see what was wrong with others, but were blind to their own faults. In Matthew 23:27, he stated that they were like tombs, whitewashed on the outside but full of dead people’s bones on their dark, nasty inside. In Matthew 23:28, he said that hypocrites appear righteous, but are full of wickedness. When Jesus really got hot under the collar, he would say, “Woe to you hypocrites.” You could translate that, “To hell with you hypocrites!”

You get the picture. If you find it offensive that Christians are hypocrites, you are again on the same page with Jesus. You may be even closer to him than you think. [Note: Again, this line of dialogue not only draws your frustrated loved one closer to identifying with Jesus, but also separates Jesus from those who profess to follow him—but really don’t].



### 3. Jesus would never say, “Christians are hypocrites.”

He would more likely say, “*Some* who *claim* to be Christians are hypocrites. However, not all who say they are Christians are really Christians. So be careful not to label everyone in churches the same.” In his Sermon on the Mount, he warned,

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

—Matthew 7:21-23



Jesus pulls no punches: a lot of folks fool themselves when they think they're Christians. They may even preach from Christian pulpits, or cast demons out of people, or perform the most spectacular miracles. They shout to the high heavens that Jesus is their Lord. But Jesus says two things: 1) They may think they know him, but he doesn't know them. 2) And they don't do the will of God. In

another place, Jesus said that on the Day of Judgment, he will expose them as goats in sheep's clothing. [Mt. 25] Being in a garage doesn't necessarily make you an automobile. Just because a mouse is in a cookie jar, that doesn't make it a cookie. And going to church doesn't make someone a Christian. We might photoshop our Instagram post, but Jesus sees right through a photoshopped religious life.

You and Jesus are on the same page when it comes to the corruption of religion and the badness of hypocrisy. But, Jesus might also put his arm around you and say, "You don't want to be guilty of judging church folks any more than you want church folks to judge you or your friends. I also have a lot of wonderful followers who claim my name. Please don't lump them in with the fakes and phonies." Jesus would ask you to do what he does: to evaluate each person individually on their own behavior. He might also wink at you and say, "Judging others is an imperfect science and even risky business. It's also something only left to God. Not you. So why don't you just relax, and let me determine who are really my true followers and who aren't."



#### **4. Jesus has the franchise on the word hypocrite.**

He would warn us not to use his word *hypocrite* in a way he would never use it himself. Words matter. How we label people can be very unfair. Words hurt others. There's an epidemic of kids committing suicide because they've been bullied by cruel words. That's why Jesus never used words loosely, unfairly or falsely. Jesus warned us in Matthew 12:36, "On the day of judgment people will give an account for every careless word they speak." Jesus cares about the people we put down even in our private gossip. In Luke 12:3 he warns us, "For what

you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in someone's ear will be shouted from the rooftops." Jesus agrees with Proverbs 18:21—



"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." So, we have to be very careful when we loosely call a whole group of people hypocrites, or even a single person a hypocrite.

Jesus would make these distinctions: 1) **The Hypocrite.** These are people who play the game, pretending to be what they aren't, very carefully photoshopping their lives to present an image they know isn't really true. 2) **The inconsistent.** These folks really want to follow Jesus, and become what he calls them to be. But they just aren't there yet. They take two steps forward, and three backward. St. Paul was one of those folks. He confessed, "I don't always understand why I do what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, and what I hate I do." [Rom. 7:15] Believers and nonbelievers alike share in Paul's struggle. That doesn't mean we're hypocrites. It just means we're human. 3) **The Ignorant.** Just because someone is a Christian, doesn't mean they have read the whole Bible or even understand it all. They do things that aren't pleasing to Jesus (or anyone else, for that matter) because no one has yet told them that Christians aren't to behave that way. 4) **The perpetually Weak.** Some Christians are so deeply wounded by life that they never get fixed this side of heaven. Sometimes, the church is not so much a haven for saints as it is a hospital for weak sinners. St. Paul wrote in Romans 15:1, that the strong in the church have to carry the weak all the way to heaven.

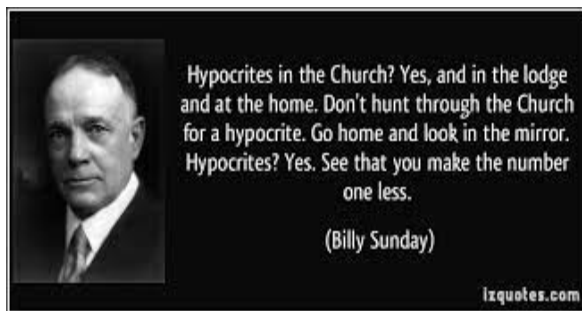
Jesus had no patience with hypocrites.

But he was super compassionate toward the inconsistent, ignorant, and perpetually weak. We live in a messed-up world, twisted by sin and human stupidity. Maybe, in an age when people are quick to cancel



people and slow to forgive them (even for things they did years ago), we should take a page out of Jesus' playbook. He never got frustrated with those who tried their best, and still came up short. He put up with so much grief from his own bumbling disciples. One betrayed him. Another denied him three times on the night he was crucified. The rest turned tail and ran when he needed them most. He even forgave those who nailed him to a cross. He knew his disciples were weak and the Romans who crucified him were ignorant. That's what makes Jesus unique in all of history. That's what makes him God in the Flesh. For, surely, no human could ever love others the way he did.

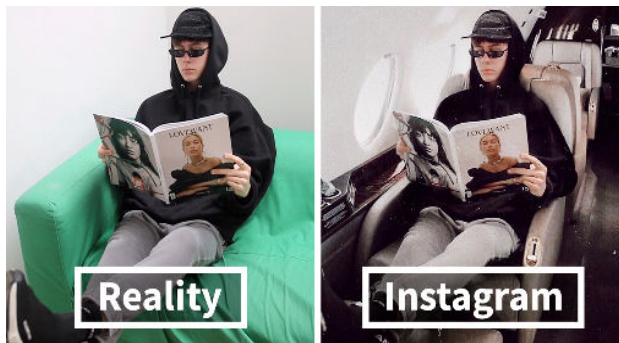
## 5. Jesus might say that Christians don't have a monopoly on hypocrisy.



He might put a hand on your shoulder and say, "Neither do Christians have a franchise on judging others." In his Sermon on the Mount, he warned us all (believers and nonbelievers alike), "You hypocrite. Take

the log out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to remove the piece of sawdust from someone else's eye." [Mt. 7:5] Wow! There's a whole new definition of a hypocrite: to judge others for the same problem we have ourselves. So, when nonbelievers say, "Christians are hypocrites," they had better be sure that there is no hypocrisy in their own lives—or they condemn themselves as being the same thing.

And, you surely know that there is plenty of hypocrisy to go around in this crazy, mixed-up world. Politicians, on both the right and the left, are often guilty of the grossest hypocrisies. People jump on private jets and yachts that leave a huge carbon footprint, to go to a meeting on global warming. Sports superstars speak out on social injustices in America, while making millions on high dollar athletic shoes made by prison labor in China or child labor in Thailand. The list of hypocrisies in this world are endless. Even at your job, or in your school and on social media, you know that almost everyone is trying to project an image of





themselves that isn't really them. We live in a photoshopped world. Most of us would be scared to death if others knew about us what we know about ourselves. That's why Gen Zs use social media to project a certain brand of themselves, and their grandparents use Botox and plastic surgery to make themselves look younger. But Jesus knows, and he loves us unconditionally, whether we are religious or nonreligious mask wearers and pretenders.

## **6. Jesus would admit it's worse when professing Christians are hypocrites.**

You innately know that. And that's why, even though hypocrisy is a game played everywhere, you know it's somehow worse when those who claim to follow Jesus are hypocrites. You may not know exactly why,



but you expect better from them. And so does Jesus. And there's a good reason for that expectation.

Christianity makes a claim that no other religion could ever dare to make. The Bible says that the Founder of the Christian Faith—unlike the Buddha, Abraham, Confucius, or Mohammed—claimed to be God in the Flesh.

Unlike all the other founders of world religions, only Jesus has risen from the dead. Only Christianity dares assert that, when people accept Jesus as their Savior, the Spirit of God puts the living, resurrected Jesus inside them. Literally, the God of the Judeo-Christian Bible indwells its believers. Those are mindboggling claims.

For all of those claims made by Christians, you would surely expect them to act differently than they often do. Jesus would agree with you. So you wonder: are their claims based on fact? If Jesus is in them, why aren't they more like him? Jesus might remind you to remember what he said earlier: some of those folks who live powerless spiritual lives really aren't truly his followers. If you could peel back their skin and look into their souls, he wouldn't be there. Others are still working out their spiritual growth because they are inconsistent, ignorant, or perpetually weak. Their human flesh gets in the way of Jesus doing his best work in them.



But don't give up on those folks. Be patient. Jesus isn't finished with them yet. In spite of the fact

that they embarrass him all the time, he still has a plan to bring them to the point where they will eventually look, act, and think just like him.

## **7. Jesus would ask you to receive him as your Lord and Savior.**



Hopefully, during this conversation with him, you have seen how true, honest, and loving he is. Maybe you've even seen how much in common you have with the way he looks at reality. Perhaps you might even sense that he understands your own heart.

He could care less whether you join some church right now, or subscribe to some religious ideal. He's not here to make any demands that you buy into things you don't yet understand. He knows that you have lots of questions about what this would mean for your beliefs, your political views, your ideas about the social and moral issues that divide people in our polarized world today. He's asking you to put all those questions on the shelf for now. You can trust him to deal with those later.

What he really wants with you is a relationship. That's all he's ever wanted since before he created you for himself. He knows you better than you know yourself. He knows all the secrets you would never tell anyone. He knows all the sins and mistakes you've made. He already died for you on the Cross and paid the price for all those things. He stands ready, when you are ready, to become your personal Savior, Lord, Big Brother, and Friend. He wants to fill you with his presence and make you the best you possible—in this world and the world to come.



It's that simple. Not religion but a relationship. But Jesus is not a high pressure sales person. Neither am I. If you're not ready yet, we can continue our dialogue in conversations to come. I'm going to love you either way you decide. And so is Jesus. But, if you are ready, there's no better time than right now.

*A talk given by Dr. Robert Petterson, Founder and President of Legacy Imperative [legacyimperative.org] in his "Sharing Jesus in a 'Woke' Culture" series at Covenant Church of Naples, Fl.*