



LIFE APPLICATIONS "1 CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 5

AVOID HYPOCRISY

One of the problems for which St. Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians in 1 Corinthians 5 is that they were hypocrites: they were very proud of themselves, believing themselves superior to others, and yet they tolerated horrible sin within their church.

Have you ever criticized someone for doing something that you do as well? Do you know someone who has a reputation for being a particularly good and noble person, but who does terrible things when no one is looking? There is a word for this type of behavior: hypocrisy.

A hypocrite is, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion." St. Paul criticizes this type of person in Romans chapter two, where he points out that people who judge others for behavior in which they themselves engage will be condemned by God (2:1-3). Unfortunately, however, some Christians only appear to be pious, when in reality they engage in many of the sins condemned in Romans 1:29-32.

Clement of Alexandria addressed the problem of hypocritical Christians in the second century:

They should frame themselves in their whole of life just as they fashion themselves in the church - for the sake of gravity. They should seek to actually be meek, pious, and loving - not merely to seem to do so. However, I cannot understand how people change their fashions and manners, depending on the place...(Some Christians) lay aside the inspiration of the assembly. After their departure from it, they become like others with whom they associate. Nay, in laying aside the artificial mask of solemnity, they are proved to be what they secretly were. After having paid reverence to the discourse about God, they leave behind what they have heard. Outside of the assembly, they foolishly amuse themselves with ungodly playing and romantic quavering.

There are several problems with living a hypocritical life. One problem is that, if your hypocrisy is exposed, you will embarrass God and other Christians. St. Paul (quoting the Holy Prophet Isaiah), states that because some Jews were known for dishonoring God through breaking the Law, "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles" (Romans 2:24). Jesus similarly said that hypocrites "shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in" (Matthew 23:13).

You have almost certainly encountered people who refuse to become Christians, or even listen to someone talk about Christianity, because they are disgusted by scandals in which Christians have been involved. There have been countless stories in the media about Christian leaders who engage in all kinds

of sinful behavior: these regrettably true incidents have done terrible damage to the reputation of Christians in our society.

Do you bring dishonor to the name of God among the people who know you? If people know that you are a Christian, but then see you drinking alcohol when you are underage, or taking drugs, or they catch you lying or stealing, then you are guilty of hypocrisy. If you do these things, you are bringing dishonor to God and His Church.

Even if a hypocrite can successfully deceive others, he or she cannot deceive God; as St. Paul states, "God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ" (Romans 2:16). St. Cyril, a fourth century bishop of Jerusalem, warns us,

Keep thy soul free from hypocrisy, O man, because of Him who searcheth hearts and reins. For as those who are going to make a levy for war examine the ages and the bodies of those who are taking service, so also the Lord in enlisting souls examines their purpose: and if any has a secret hypocrisy, He rejects the man as unfit for His true service; but if He finds one worthy, to him He readily gives His grace.

You should always keep in mind the teaching of St. Polycarp, a bishop of Smyrna in the second century:

Let us then serve Him in fear, and with all reverence, even as He Himself has commanded us, and as the apostles who preached the Gospel unto us, and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Lord [have alike taught us]. Let us be zealous in the pursuit of that which is good, keeping ourselves from causes of offense, from false brethren, and from those who in hypocrisy bear the name of the Lord, and draw away vain men into error.