

HYPOCRISY CAN INFECT ANY OF US

Today's Text: Gal. 2: 11-21

Extracts:

Now when Peer had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. *And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy* [Gal. 2: 11-13]

Donald Sterling is the owner (since 1981) of the Los Angeles Clippers, a professional basketball franchise of the National Basketball Association (NBA) that is dominated by black players.¹ On Friday, April 25, 2014, a media source revealed a recording of a secret conversation between Sterling and his black friend, Vanessa Stiviano, over her pictures with basketball stars, such as Magic Johnson. He reportedly told her, "It bothers me a lot that you want to broadcast that you are associating with black people... You can sleep with [them], you can do whatever you want [but] the little I ask you is ... not to bring them to my games." The public reaction was sharp and loud. The NBA banned Sterling for life from its membership and fined him \$2.5 million. His team, the Clippers, has now been offered for sale.

*Of interest to us is not what Sterling has reportedly said because everyone is entitled to his opinion. Our concern is his **hypocrisy, that is, the deep gulf between his word and action**. Here was the longest serving owner of a franchise in a league that has predominantly black players. Here is a man who has made his fortunes on the sweat of black players and officials. Yet, he held deep racial prejudices. Are we ourselves different from him? How many of us parade ourselves as men and women of God and yet we are at the forefront of immoral conduct or looting of public treasuries? Why do we expect others to practise what we preach to them when we do not do same? Therefore, hypocrisy can infect any of us. In this week's bible story, Paul caught Peter and some other leading apostles and disciples in an embarrassing act of hypocrisy. Let us find out how he handled it and some lessons that we can learn for our own good.*

¹ Story is based on the following sources: "Donald Sterling," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Sterling ; and "Microsoft's ex-CEO Steve Ballmer 'wins Clippers bid'", *BBC News*; 30 May 2014; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-27630630>

1. Background: Peter succumbs to hypocrisy

During His earthly ministry two thousand years ago, Jesus had a running battle with the scribes and the Pharisees who put themselves on the judgment seat over other people with regard to the strict observance of the Law of Moses which they themselves only followed in word but hardly in deed. On one occasion, as huge crowds milled around Him, Jesus warned His disciples [[Lk 12: 1-3]:

*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy, for **there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.***

So, if what you say in secret about your neighbours (who can be your parents, siblings or children, bosses or colleagues, fellow church members and others) is different from what you say or do in their presence, that is hypocrisy on show! Therefore, you had better sit up to read this piece because you and I are as guilty as hell!

You will recall that soon after Paul began his ministry to the Gentiles, some believers (Jews, presumably) came to Antioch to tell the new Gentile converts that unless they were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they could not be saved. It generated so much contention that Paul and Barnabas (and certain others) decided to refer the matter to the Jerusalem Council for adjudication [Acts 14: 1-3]. The three pillars of that body were James, the Lord's brother, Peter and John, the beloved disciple [Gal. 1: 9]. Before the meeting of that Council, Peter himself had experienced the role and power of grace in salvation when God sent him to convert the home of a Roman military officer, Cornelius [Acts 10: 34-48]. In his opening remarks at the said meeting of the Jerusalem Council, Peter alluded to that his personal experience with the Gentiles and concluded by saying, "Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But *we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they*" [Acts 14: 6-11].

After Paul and Barnabas had presented their case, James agreed with Peter that they should not trouble the Gentiles (who were turning to God) with circumcision and such-like Jewish practices. The Council then agreed on a pastoral letter to be taken back by Paul and Barnabas and some other elders from Jerusalem. When the letter was read to the church at Antioch, "they rejoiced over its encouragement" [vv. 12-31].

Move the clock a few years forward and we come to the story that forms the subject of this week's study. Peter had come to Antioch where Paul and Barnabas

were ministering. Peter did something that drew Paul's sharp reaction. Here is a summary of the story:

a) *Peter's act of hypocrisy*

Paul wrote, "***Before certain men came from James, [Peter] would eat with the Gentiles, but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision***" [Gal. 2: 12]. That was a clear act of hypocrisy, especially coming from the head of the fledgling church that Jesus, on the day of His ascension to Heaven, had commissioned to be witnesses for Him not only in Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria but "to the end of the earth" [Acts 1: 8].

You can imagine the impact of Peter's hypocrisy on the faith of the Gentiles in Antioch that day. They would ask (silently, probably) among themselves, "Was this man not a signatory to that letter from the Jerusalem Council that encouraged us so much? Why is he now treating us like second-class believers in Christ?" The skeptics that had not yet joined the new movement would jeer at their country men and women in the new faith, saying, "Did we not tell you that they don't mean what they say? They will always be Jews and we will remain Gentiles in their eyes."

Do you know how many ***cultural practices have crept into our churches by virtue of the hypocrisy of the church leaders***? For example, some congregations close their eyes to pray and some do not. Some kneel and others do not. In some, women cover their heads and in others, they do not. In some, they kneel or prostrate to greet their church elders and leaders. Yet, when John (on the island of Patmos) knelt down to worship an angel, the heavenly host said to him, "See that you do not do that. I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!" [Rev. 19: 10].

b) *Others also fell with him!*

Peter was not alone for "***the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy***" [Gal. 2: 13]. Can you imagine Paul's close associate, Barnabas, that had accompanied him to Jerusalem to receive the mandate to treat all believers as equals, was "carried away by their hypocrisy"?

That he was carried away suggests that hypocrisy can infect anybody, no matter how strong you think s(he) may be. We shall come back to this matter later.

c) *But Paul took all of them on!*

Paul was not carried away. Instead, ***he withstood Peter to his face*** “because he was to be blamed” [v. 11]. Paul spoke truth to authority. He openly challenged Peter because his hypocrisy threatened Paul’s gospel to the Gentiles that they would be saved by grace through faith in Jesus, not by works of righteousness through observing the Law of Moses.

I wonder how many of us today would dare challenge their erring church leaders at all, not to talk of doing it openly. You would be branded a rebel or a person with inordinate ambition to take over the church! Paul did it and rescued the church of Christ from ridicule. But did Peter hate Paul for his bravado? I doubt so because, in one of his epistles, he addressed Paul as “our beloved brother” who had written epistles with the wisdom given to him [2 Pet. 3: 15].

Clearly, Paul has opened our eyes to ***a major cancer eating up the modern church. Congregations are covering up sexual immorality and stealing of church funds by their leaders so as not to hurt the public image of their churches!*** Some pastors who condemn popular sins in the open are actually practising such sins in private. Sooner than later, as in the case of Peter above, the truth comes out because, as Jesus Himself put it, “There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops” [Lk 12: 2-3]. What lessons can we learn from Peter’s experience?

2. Lessons for modern believers

The following lessons easily flow from Peter’s experience above:

a) *You are not immune from hypocrisy*

We are told, “The rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy” [Gal. 2: 13]. That suggests that any of us could have succumbed to Peter’s hypocrisy if we had been there.

There are many possible reasons for that. For example, ***it could be out of fear of people in authority***. You may be familiar with the story of a king who was said to be wearing invisible clothes whereas he was stark naked. His subjects related to him as he passed by as if all was normal until an innocent little child asked his mother, “Why is the king naked?” The adults were infected with hypocrisy!

Another possible reason for hypocrisy is ***fear of punishment or loss of favour or perquisites if we do not act hypocritically like everybody else around us***. For example, the parents of the man born blind knew for sure

that it was Jesus that had healed their son. But when the Pharisees challenged them to confirm how their blind son got back his sight, they answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself.” They answered that way because ‘they feared the Jews [who] had agreed already that if anyone confessed that [Jesus] was the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue’ [Jn 9: 18-22].

We may just want to be politically correct because we need other people’s support, approval or acceptance. According to an African proverb, a subordinate looking for promotion will commend the beauty of his boss’s daughter even when she looks like a monster! The word of God says, “If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked” [Prov. 29: 12]. That is hypocrisy at work!

b) *You can be vicariously liable for others’ hypocrisy*

By getting carried away with Peter’s hypocrisy, Barnabas put his ministry among the Gentiles much at risk. In other words, ***we can easily get vicariously liable for other people’s hypocrisy and that has its own consequences.***

Take the case of King Jehoshaphat of Judah who went to visit King Ahab of Israel with whom he had an alliance by marriage [2 Chron. 18: 1]. When his host asked him to go to war with him against Syria over Ramoth Gilead, he agreed, presumably because of the marital bond plus the warm reception accorded him and his entourage. Even when a true prophet of God, Micaiah, had told both kings that Ahab was going to be killed in that battle, Jehoshaphat agreed to go with him in royal robes while Ahab disguised himself! As the Syrians surrounded him to kill him, Jehoshaphat cried out and escaped [vv. 2-31]. But as he was returning to Jerusalem, a seer, Jehu, met him and said to him, “Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Therefore, the wrath of the LORD is upon you” [2 Chron. 19: 1-2]. You can then see how he attracted a multi-prong attack by the Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites on his kingdom soon after [2 Chron. 20: 1-2].

If you want to be everything to everybody, make sure it is based on truth and integrity. A rolling stone may gather no moss but it gathers bruises!

c) *Therefore, always be in Christ*

In the midst of general failure, Paul stood up against Peter and the other hypocrites. He stood by his faith in Christ, and affirmed authoritatively as follows [Gal. 2: 20]:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

That says it all. *What is the life that you now live in flesh? Do you live to please the world or to please Christ? You can never please the world because its standards and norms are as changeable as the weather. You will be aiming at a moving target and your arrows will keep missing. Hypocrisy is what you get. But if you live by faith in Christ Jesus who gave His life for you, you have built your life on the Rock. Let the rains descend; let the floods come; and let the winds blow and beat on you. You will not fall because you are built on the Rock. That is your insurance against hypocrisy. That is Paul's message in this week's study.*

3. Conclusion: Let your yes be yes!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" [Matt. 5: 37]. That same Jesus (who returned to heaven after His crucifixion, death and resurrection) told John in a vision on the island of Patmos, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work" [Rev. 22: 12].

What work will you show Him when He returns- hypocrisy or faith? *To live in sin but portray a public image of piety is hypocrisy. To claim to know God but deny Jesus as His only begotten Son and only way to the Father is hypocrisy. But sooner than later, your true self will be revealed- when you face the judgment seat of Christ.*

The choice is yours.