

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

First German Evangelical Lutheran Church

Are You a Hypocrite?

Matthew 21:28-32

"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'²⁹ "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.³¹ "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

When you ask someone who doesn't regularly attend a church why he doesn't go, you get a variety of answers. Someone might say, "I don't have time." Another might say, "All the church wants is my money." One reason I have heard more than once is this: "I don't go to church because it is filled with hypocrites. I know plenty of people who call themselves Christians but they do just as many bad things as everyone else." This is, of course, just another excuse. But is there any truth to this statement? Is the church full of hypocrites? Are you a hypocrite? If we are going to answer these questions, we need to get right to the heart of the matter: what exactly is a hypocrite? Jesus answers this question for us today with the short parable we heard in our Gospel reading.

The words Jesus speaks in our parable he spoke in the temple courts sometime during the week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday—what we call Holy Week. It was the week of the Passover. People had come to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate this big festival. The city's population swelled and this year, in particular, there was much tension in the air. Jesus had caused quite a stir among the people. Many did not know what to make of him. Was this miracle worker the promised Messiah or was he an enemy of the people that should be feared? The men whom Jesus addressed these words to had already made up their mind. This was a group of the chief priests and elders of

the people. They were supposed to be religious leaders, but they had not done their job. Instead of leading the people to their Savior Jesus, they were trying to drive them away from him. They despised Jesus. They saw him as a threat and they wanted to get rid of him.

It is clear that Jesus wanted to expose them for the frauds that they were before the people. And that is exactly what he did with the short parable that we have before us. Jesus said, *“There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ 'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.³¹ 'Which of the two did what his father wanted?’* The answer to the question is obvious. The son who actually went and did what the father asked is the one that did what he wanted. The point is this: what you say is not as important as what you actually do. In a spiritual sense, this means that saying you follow your Heavenly Father does not necessarily mean you are actually doing what he wants.

This parable certainly applies to these chief priests and elders. Like the second son in the parable, they said the right words. They said that they were followers of the Lord. They even did some of the right actions. They followed the commands of the Lord in an outward way. They brought their sacrifices to the temple. They said their prayers. They celebrated the festivals. But, ultimately, they were not doing what their Father wanted. What did their Father want? Jesus pointed these chief priests and elders to John the Baptist. John came to this earth as a forerunner of the Savior. He came preaching the Word of God. He came to tell the people what the Father wanted. And what the Father wanted was simply this: repent and believe. Believe in Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world. This is what the Father wanted from those chief priests and elders. He wasn't interested in their words or their outward actions. He wanted their hearts. He wanted penitent hearts, hearts that beat with faith in Jesus. But the chief priests refused to believe. And this is how they showed themselves to be hypocrites. It wasn't about their actions. It was about their attitude. It was about their heart. They called themselves followers, but their hearts were far from the Lord.

In explaining this parable, Jesus says some very shocking words. It is easy to see how he can compare the chief priests and the elders to that second son, who was a hypocrite. But who was it that he used to compare with the first

son—the one who truly did what his father wanted. Jesus spoke of prostitutes and tax collectors. That must have stung for those chief priests to hear that! “The tax collectors and prostitutes are truly following the Lord and we aren’t?!” Again, it was a matter of the heart. On the outside, these “sinners” did not look like they could possibly be a part of the kingdom of God. But they took John’s words to heart. They repented. They believed. They were forgiven and restored. The opposite of hypocrisy is this: faith in Jesus. That is what the Heavenly Father wanted from the people and faith is what he found in the most unlikely place—among the outcasts of society.

Now it is time to see ourselves in this parable. Which of the two sons are we? Do you identify with that first son who did what the father wanted or with the second son who showed himself to be a hypocrite? A true hypocrite is an outright unbeliever. It is someone who says he follows the Lord but his heart is far from God. I pray that this is not someone you would identify with. But it would be naïve to think that there are no hypocrites in our church. Even if you don’t see that you are a complete hypocrite like the son in the story, I think we all have to admit that there is some hypocrisy lurking inside each and every one of us. Remember, hypocrisy is a matter of the heart. Hypocrisy is an attitude.

We are acting hypocritically when we say the right things or we do the right things, but we don’t do them out of faith in God or thankfulness for what he has done. Have you ever come to church not because you seek the opportunity to praise the Lord, but because you feel you have to? That is hypocrisy. Do you ever give your offerings to the Lord not with a free and generous spirit, but because you figure you have to put something in to make yourself look good? That’s hypocrisy. Have you ever helped out at church or somewhere else not because it was a way to serve the Lord but because it made you look good or you felt it then gave you the right to look down on others who don’t do as much as you do? That’s hypocrisy. And the list could go on. I think if we were honest, we would have to admit that there are times in our lives—mine just as much as yours—when we act like the second son in the parable. We might say the right thing or outwardly follow the Lord, but we are not actually doing what our Father wants. We are not acting in repentance and faith.

When we see that kind of hypocrisy in our hearts, we need to listen to Jesus’ words as he points us to the message of John the Baptist. John’s words are still important for us today. He tells us to repent. Repentance is a matter of the

heart. It means confessing our sin, forsaking it and turning to the Lord for forgiveness. We also need to hear the message of John the Baptist when he says: “*Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” Remember what Jesus did just days after he spoke the words of our reading. He willingly gave his life on the cross for the sins of the world. In Jesus’ blood, you find perfect peace. All of your sins are washed away. All of your hypocritical moments are forgotten by your Father in heaven. He sees you as his own dear child. This is what the Father wants for you—he wants you to repent and believe. When you turn to the Lord in faith, you are acting like the first son in the parable. No matter what your life was like before. No matter how little it seems as though you deserve to be a part of the kingdom of God. By repentance and faith, you are a part of God’s family.

This is where it begins: in the heart. A heart filled with faith is a heart free from hypocrisy. Having the right attitude in your heart results in the right actions in your life. You will truly be doing what the Father asks you to live and serve him out of gratitude and joy. May God the Father give us all such hearts of faith and lives that are lived to his glory. **Amen.**

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Pastor Steven Hahm
pastorhahm@hotmail.com
920.684.0101