

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost/November 11, 2018
Mark 12:38-44/Whose the Hypocrite?
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“...and in the age to come eternal life”

Have you ever heard someone remarked that there was a special place in hell waiting for a notorious bad person, such as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden?

While the commenter’s remark might be more emotional than theological, Jesus did seem to say something similar in today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus was not talking about a dictator, but about those scribes who abused their power and authority. These men lived a public life appearing respectable. They enjoyed first class treatment whenever they appeared in public. They taught at the Sabbath School and were honored members of society.

However they were hypocrites. They were responsible for teaching the law but they used their knowledge of the legal system to obtain the property of widows. They used their positions of trust and authority to prey on the helpless. Their status and prestige were false fronts for predatory behavior behind the scenes. They lived their whole life for themselves and no one else. Jesus said, “They will receive the greater condemnation.”

After Jesus condemned these hypocrites, the Gospel says Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. No doubt some of those wealthy hypocrites were among the contributors that day. They would be sure to make their donation with a flourish so all who were there could see and give praise.

In contrast to these hypocrites, today's Gospel tells us about a poor widow. It is possible she may have been a victim of the very hypocrites Jesus condemned. In spite of her extreme poverty, she had a contribution. She threw in two small coins. Our English translation indicates these coins were about equal to a penny, but the original Greek indicates these coins weren't even that much. How poor and meager her gift must have seemed to those who looked on.

However, Jesus saw something significant in her action. He called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Jesus' words are sharper than any two-edged sword.

On one hand, they condemn those who stand idly by and do not assist this poor woman in any way. His words are a true lament over all those who are fat with cash, see this poor widow, and do nothing for her. He laments even more for those who cheated her out of her life's savings. Those hypocrites were wealthy on the outside, but their hearts were poor on the inside. They would do well to ask, [Mark 8:36] "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"

On the other hand, Christ's words praise the Holy Spirit's gift of faith that allowed this poor widow to experience the joy of giving to the Lord. Christ's words in the literal Greek say, "... from her poverty, as much as she had, she threw her whole life." Jesus looked beyond the coins and saw a woman who loved God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength. She not only placed her life savings into the treasury, but Jesus saw she knew her life was in God's hands. She may have been poor on the outside, but her heart was truly rich on the inside.

Hypocrites are so sad. God gives them everything it takes to be genuine. They have the knowledge in order to keep up the act, so they know what is right. They know enough to fool others into thinking they are devout. It is hard work to lead a double life, one in public and the other behind closed doors. Hypocrites choose to abuse their God given talents and they put them to an evil use. They are in the extremely dangerous position of knowing exactly what is right and then making a conscious decision to do otherwise. Is it any wonder hypocrites often provoked Jesus to righteous anger?

In spite of the danger, hypocrisy is extremely seductive. Judges take bribes. Lawmakers prey on the very people they claim to protect. Clergymen, Professors, doctors, and even Boy Scout leaders have made headlines by preying on those under their authority. The greater the authority and ability, the greater the potential for abuse.

So where do we fit into this picture? Have we ever been hypocrites? Have we mouthed the words of the Lord's Prayer perfectly while thinking about lunch? Do we start getting antsy during the sermon because the service is a little long? Do we get angry when we do something special for the church and no one notices? Those who are honest know we have indeed been hypocrites. We do indeed deserve the greater condemnation.

Fortunately, someone has thrown in a whole life for us. Just as this poor widow offered her whole life at the offering box, so the Holy One who watched her, offered His whole life on the cross. Here is One who was never a hypocrite, who never did anything deserving condemnation. Here is One who endured the greatest condemnation and made payment for the sins of the world. When Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross for us, He offered up His life as the perfect sacrifice that satisfied the justice of God.

Because Jesus Christ lived a perfect life free of hypocrisy and every other sin, the grave could not hold Him. Although His friends laid Him in the tomb on Friday, He rose from the dead on Sunday. He now lives forever and offers us a whole life. Through His sacrificial death and His triumphant resurrection, He offers us forgiveness for all our sins including the sin of hypocrisy. With that forgiveness also comes life and salvation.

The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to give us the same faith the poor widow in today's Gospel had. He works through the audible Word of God as we hear the readings and He works through the tangible Word of God we eat and drink in the sacrament. The faith the Holy Spirit gives us, receives the gifts Jesus Christ earned for us as He gave His life for us. The faith the Holy Spirit works in us through Word and Sacrament, gives us a share in the Kingdom of God. Wherever God rules and reigns, we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation.

There is a day when every person will leave this world behind. Those who leave without faith in Jesus Christ will suffer the eternal condemnation their hypocrisy and other sins have earned. You who have faith in Jesus Christ will leave your sins and its condemnation behind. You will enter the eternal joy of heaven. You will enjoy the eternal peace of Him who threw in His whole life for you. Praise be to God!