

ANOTHER KIND OF HYPOCRITE

Matthew 21:23-32

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

October 1, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 21, verses 23 through 32. In this gospel lesson, Jesus calls the righteous to repentance. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 21, beginning at verse 23, we read in Jesus' name.

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are very few things that everyone can agree on. But one thing that, it seems, everyone agrees on is that we don't like hypocrites. Right? Nobody likes a hypocrite. This is universal. But that makes me wonder, *Who are these hypocrites?* If nobody likes them, then who's left to be one? It's kind of like when Yogi Berra said, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." And if nobody likes a hypocrite, then who's left to be one? Maybe no one is really a hypocrite. Or, more likely, everyone is, at least in some way.

What is a hypocrite? Usually, we mean someone who says one thing, but does another. It's like the second son, who tells his dad he will work in the vineyard, but then he doesn't (21:30). Or it's a father who tells his children to clean their rooms, while the garage is a big mess. It's the bus driver who shouts, "No yelling on the bus!" Or it's the guy who speaks against homosexuality while he cheats on his wife. Or maybe you judge people for being too judgmental. Or the sins might even seem unrelated. You might be really strict about speed limits,

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but you slack off at work. It could be anything. You speak against one sin, while you commit another, or even the same sin.

So what is it that we don't like about hypocrites? It's the double-standard, or at least we think that's what it is. And sometimes that is what it is. But, more often, it's simply that we don't want someone else to tell us what to do. When someone touches on a sin in our lives, if we can find some moral flaw in them, then we can discredit them, and we think we don't have to listen to them. *Who are you to talk about my sin, when you're a sinner too?* We don't want someone else to think they're better than us. It's like, *Who are you to think you're better than me, when I'm clearly better than you?*

So the hypocrite is really just the person who speaks first. It doesn't even matter what sin you commit or what sin you're calling out in someone else. If you speak first, they can come back against your sin and call you a hypocrite. Or if they call out your sin first, then you can retort back and call them a hypocrite. But if that's what it means to be a hypocrite, then we're all hypocrites.

Someone asked me once if I ever preach about sins that I struggle with. I laughed and said, "If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to say much about sin." If that makes me a hypocrite, so be it. I have to be. If I wait until I'm perfect, or even just better than average, it's going to be a long time before I can talk with you about your sins. If the only people who can talk about sin are those who have mastered it, then no one will be able to talk about sin, our world would be a very violent and chaotic place, and none of us would ever come to repentance. So I'm a sinner, talking about sin. I'm a hypocrite, talking about hypocrisy.

But Jesus puts a little bit of a spin on it. He talks about another kind of hypocrite, and he calls all of us to repentance.

In this lesson, the priests and elders challenge Jesus, but Jesus turns the tables on them, so to speak. It takes place on Monday of Holy Week. If you look back to the beginning of chapter 21, you will find Jesus' triumphal entry, when he rode into Jerusalem on a small donkey. Five chapters later, in chapter 26, Jesus is arrested. That's on Thursday of Holy Week. In chapter 27, he's crucified. That's Good Friday. And in chapter 28 he rises from the dead. That's Easter Sunday. So chapters 21 through the beginning of chapter 26 are Sunday through Wednesday of Holy Week. And most of the Gospel lessons over the next two months will come from this section of Matthew. So keep the historical context in mind. It's very helpful to understanding what's going on and why Jesus says and does certain things.

There is a great amount of tension between Jesus and the leaders of the Jews. One part of it is that they are jealous of Jesus and his popularity. The other part is that they are afraid that, if he gets too many followers, Rome will be concerned about an uprising and put a violent end to it. So the leaders of the Jews, or at least most of them, were looking for an excuse to execute him. They thought it better to have one man die than for the entire nation to be crushed under the mighty hand of the Roman Empire (John 11:47-50).

It is also the week of Passover, which was the biggest of the big three feasts in Jerusalem, so there were many, many Jews pouring into Jerusalem. Everyone had the feeling that something was going to happen with Jesus this week. The part that no one understood at the time was that Jesus actually intended to die.

So you have all these Jews who followed Jesus and were excited about him, a bunch of priests and elders who wanted to kill Jesus, but were afraid of the people, and Jesus, who actually

intended to die. And everything that Jesus did this week was designed to get him on the cross. He does things to provoke the priests and elders and push them over the last hurdle.

On Sunday of Holy Week, following the spectacle of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a small donkey while the crowds shouted his praises, he went to the temple and made a disturbance. There were merchants in the temple who sold animals for the sacrifices. That's the main reason Jews went to the temple. There were all sorts of occasions in life when they were required to make sacrifices. So, naturally, it was very lucrative to sell animals right at the temple. You could charge a premium. It's kind of like how a hot dog costs a dollar at a gas station, but that same hot dog is eight dollars at a baseball game. Except it was at the temple. Jesus was offended by it, because it was his house (21:13), and these merchants were using it to extort the people. So Jesus drove them out and flipped over their tables with stacks of money. Imagine this. If you ever think of Jesus as some peace-loving hippie, imagine the rage it would take for one guy to drive out all these merchants. Imagine coins flying all over the place, clanging on the floor, and these merchants scrambling around to pick up their money and run away. And, apparently, they don't come back the rest of the week, because Jesus spends much of that week in the temple, teaching. He put the fear of God into them.

And the reading for today occurs the very next day, on Monday of Holy Week. He entered the temple and was teaching. So the chief priests and elders asked him, "By whose authority are you doing these things?" (21:23). The "these things" would be the cleansing of the temple and now teaching in the temple. In essence, they're asking, *Who do you think you are? What right do you have to come in here, disrupt our system, and teach in our place?* The priests governed the temple and decided who could teach there. But Jesus comes in, acting like he owns the place, which, of course, he does, but the priests and elders don't recognize that. They think that Jesus should ask permission from them. So they challenge him on this.

There's also a strategy to their challenge. Remember, they're looking for an excuse to execute Jesus. So if they can get him to say something incriminating, and especially something that offends the people, they can execute him without so much backlash. They're trying to get Jesus to come right out and say, "I am God." That's the thing where the people might say, "Okay; that's a little too far." When they ask, "By what authority are you doing these things," they want him to say, "My own." That's the straight answer they're looking for.

Throughout much of Jesus' ministry, he had been revealing that he is the Son of God, but he usually stopped short of outright saying it. He let people figure it out from his miracles and his teaching. It seems kind of odd, at times, when he commands his disciples not to tell anyone who he is (e.g., 16:20), or he even forbids the demons from saying who he is (e.g., Mark 1:25). Jesus was revealing that he is the Christ and the Son of God, but he let people put the pieces together. That way, he couldn't be accused of blasphemy and be executed, at least, not until the proper time.

So when he acts like he has authority in the temple, he's revealing, without saying it, that he is the Son of God. That's what gives him the right, but he doesn't want to say it until the Passover comes. He's provoking the priests and elders, but he's not yet giving them what they need.

So he turns the tables on them. He says, "I will tell you" (21:24), but first they have to answer Jesus' question, "The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" (21:25). It's kind of like, *Okay; if you want to challenge me, then I get to challenge you*

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too. Or, I'll answer you're 'gotcha' question if you answer mine. Let's make a deal. But they don't go for it.

Now what does John have to do with any of this? Jesus is not just pulling this out of thin air. John and Jesus were aligned. They were relatives. Jesus went to John for Baptism (3:13). They preached the same thing (3:2; 4:17). And some of Jesus' apostles had even been disciples of John (John 1:35-40).

It was a dangerous question for the priests and elders, because the people held John to be a prophet. To make it worse, John was dead. He was beheaded for speaking against King Herod, who had stolen his brother's wife (14:1-12). Everyone knew that it was wrong to kill John. So this wouldn't just be speaking ill of the dead; it would be criticizing a hero and martyr. *No, thank you.* So the priests and elders decline Jesus' challenge.

But here's the interesting thing, Jesus answered their question, just not with the words they needed. By bringing up John, his Baptism, and the source of his Baptism, Jesus implied that his authority comes from the same place: heaven. He answered their question, but in a way that only angered them further.

Then he sticks it in their eye with this short parable about the two sons. It might remind you of another parable about two sons, one in which one son thinks he's doing the will of the father, while it is actually the other son, the one who seems to be rebellious, who pleases the father (Luke 15:11-32).

The meaning of this parable is similar. And it's pretty simple. The first son represents obvious sinners, like tax collectors and prostitutes, who believed the preaching of John and then also of Jesus. And the second son, the one who tells the father that he will go work, but then doesn't, represents the priests and elders. They have the outward appearance of righteousness. They say the right things and do the right things, but their hearts are far from God.

The second son is a hypocrite. He tells the father that he will work in the vineyard, but then he doesn't. This fits our standard definition of a hypocrite. He says one thing, but does the opposite. But pay attention to how Jesus applies this. He equates the second son with the priests and elders. Now, everything we know about these people shows that they took God's Law very seriously. They didn't just say the right things. They also did the right things. They had strict standards of living, and they lived by those standards. If anyone practiced what they preached, it was these guys. The apostle Paul, before he was converted to faith in Christ, was an excellent example of this way of life (Phil. 3:4-6). He lived an exemplary life. And that's the kind of person that Jesus calls a hypocrite. He equates them with the son who says he will do the will of the Father, but then doesn't. It doesn't seem to fit.

What's going on? Jesus is talking about another kind of hypocrite. Jesus makes it about faith. The second son, the one who did not do the will of the father, is the person who does not believe. To Jesus, a hypocrite is the person who practices what he preaches, but has not faith. It's the person who behaves the right way, putting on the appearance that they are a child of God, but they do not trust him and do not believe in him.

The tax collectors and prostitutes knew what they were. They knew they were rotten sinners. By their way of life, they appeared rebellious to God. But when John came preaching repentance and forgiveness. They repented. They believed his message, they were baptized, and, when Jesus began his ministry, they followed and trusted in him. They looked like they were not children of God. But, when called to repentance, they believed and became children of God. This was the will of their Father.

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The priests and elders were the exact opposite. They looked and lived like children of God. But they did not believe John, nor did they believe Jesus. Their hearts were far from God. Why? Because they trusted themselves. They trusted their own righteousness. They looked at their own lives, and they looked pretty good. Who was John to tell them they weren't good enough? Who was Jesus to call them to repentance? The hypocrisy is that, by their works they appeared to be children of God, but they had no faith. They did not trust the God they claimed to believe in. They appeared to be one thing, when they were the opposite. They trusted in themselves. They had works, but no faith, and this is the worst kind of hypocrisy, because, without faith, no one will be saved.

So how about you? Who do you trust in? Do you know who you are? You might live the right way. You might practice what you preach. Repent and believe the Gospel. Jesus wasn't just provoking the priests and elders. He was also calling them to repentance. If they rejected his words, it was provocation. But if they accepted them, it was a call to repentance. So take it as a call to repentance.

Do you know who you are? Do you know that you are a rebellious child, unworthy of God's grace? Even if you've had a lifetime growing in good works and the knowledge of God, do you know that you are still unworthy of his favor? We can be led astray by the illusion of our own righteousness. We can begin to trust in that growth. That is to act like a child of God, without trusting in him. That's hypocrisy.

Trust in the God who provoked the people who wanted to kill him. Because he did that for you. He did that to bring you back to himself. Everything was about getting to the cross, where he paid for every sin, including hypocrisy. Trust in Jesus' innocent death and his glorious resurrection. It was for you, so that you can be that child who, despite a rebellious heart, enters into his vineyard by faith. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.