

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 7:1-11; Luke 19:41-48

God was upset with Israel for (get this!) going to church. God was sick and tired of Israel attending services in His house. What? Well, that's part of it, but far from all of it. Did you listen to our first lesson? I'm sure you did, why else would you be here, right? God was upset with Israel for what? For thinking that attendance in His house without repentance or the slightest intention to amend, to leave behind, their evil ways could make them square with God. God was sick and tired of Israel thinking that church membership divorced from faith was a ticket to heaven. The Sabbath had become for them nothing more than lip service. They came and went the same stubborn sinners. The words they heard didn't sink in. Their hearts remained cold and calloused, their minds tangled in a gutter full of idolatry and sexual immorality and lies and greed. Church was not where they were going to be healed, to be counseled, to be helped out of the iniquity that entangled them. No, they had turned God's church, a hospital for sinners, into a showroom for hypocritical and self-deluded pseudo-saints.

Some people claim they won't go to church because it's full of hypocrites. I've told you many times one of my favorite replies: "There's always room for more." The sad fact, however, is that there are hypocrites in the church, and yes, sometimes I am the hypocrite, and sometimes you are the hypocrite. Whenever we turn things on their head, when we think we go to church first and foremost to do something for God rather than to receive something from Him, that by putting in an hour we are good to do whatever we will with all the other hours of the week, that God wants our butts in the pews more than His kingdom in our hearts, we are deceiving ourselves, putting on a show that is most certainly not edifying and shouldn't be found entertaining.

The church has her hypocrites, and yes, sometimes is full of them. The hospital has her sick people, and yes, sometimes is full of them. The answer for the hypocrite is not an absence from God's service, but rather active listening and meditation in it. And just to be clear, the word hypocrite comes from Greek words put together to describe someone passing sweeping or self-serving judgment over others, which is exactly what someone does when he or she dismisses the church as full of hypocrites and thus of no use.

The problem with Israel wasn't that they were going to church, but that, while their feet took them there, they hadn't brought their hearts and minds. They were like hospital patients insistent they aren't sick. There's little a doctor can do for such patients. They must first own up to their sickness. The same is true in the church. The law must often do its work before a person is willing to be treated with the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, of grace, mercy, and truth. The tax collector is much easier to minister to than the Pharisee, the one convicted of his sins much easier than the one still pleading a feigned innocence.

God had Israel's best interests in mind. Hiding an illness or putting off addressing it is only a temporary solution. In the end, that illness will have its way, will ravage the body. Acknowledging an illness, while hard to do at the time, is the best and only true route to cleansing and new life. That's what the Bible means when it says that *pride goes before the fall*.

Now, let's be clear. Am I saying that confessing one's sins and striving to leave them behind is an overnight deal? No. When we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and they are forgiven, but leaving them behind is easier said than done, and only accomplished in any way with Christ's constant aid, with fervent prayer, the regular counsel of the Word, and not without ups and downs. Luther calls the Christian life a daily drowning of the old Adam, the sinful flesh. The problem is that old Adam can tread water surprisingly well. Our sinful flesh hangs around our neck wherever we go in this life, and so the Christian life is a struggle, a struggle against sin, against the deceptions and traps of the devil, and the allurements of a fallen world. That does not mean it is a life without joy. Our joy is in Christ, in His help, His forgiveness, His daily material and spiritual blessings, His church, His Word. Yet the Christian life is a struggle.

I believe this example is Luther's, but I couldn't find it again for the life of me. Let's just say that anything worthwhile in it is probably Luther's and anything deficient is my own. Ok. So let's say a sinner cusses 1,000 times a day. Let's say that sinner becomes a Christian. How many times a day would we expect him to cuss a day now? Most would say zero, and that would be wonderful. While that sinner has become a saint, so to speak, he is still a sinner saint, and so we rejoice with the angels when he cusses only 999 times a day, and then 998, and so forth.

Is that an excuse for sinning? No, but it is the reality of the Christian life. That man is struggling against a sin that for years has had the better of him, and that sin is becoming lesser and Christ greater in his daily life. Now, if that Christian starts to think that he has a free pass to cuss 997 time the next day because that's the way it works, he is no Christian at all, or is just hanging on, because faith desires not to sin at all. No, he repents of the 998 as of the 1,000 cuss words. Yet should that Christian near despair because he still struggles with sin, he must be reminded that the struggle is a sign of his faith and that perfection lies on the other side of our tombstone.

Our growth in holiness in the Christian life is a lifelong preparation and conditioning for heaven, not an overnight sensation like some miracle weight loss cure or hair loss remedy, although be sure to let me know if you find some of those. Progressing in the Christian life means always to be beginning again, always to be returning to who you are, a child of God, by returning to where God made you that, to Baptism, where you first confessed your need for grace and received Christ's righteousness.

The Lord's words through Jeremiah ought to strike us to the heart. Hear them again:

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.

What sin are you struggling with? Give it to the Lord. Strive against it, and know that through faith, while it may get its licks in, when Christ is your Lord, that sin cannot have dominion over you. Return to the Savior again and again for aid, and work to make progress. Israel's problem was not that the Lord expected them to be sinless—the Lord knew that couldn't be the case, except through His declaration of righteousness afforded through the death and resurrection of our righteous Christ—but rather He expected them to be in struggle with sin, which they clearly weren't.

So ask yourself, are you struggling with sin? Is it something you joke about or that makes you sick to your stomach? Is it something that you boast about or something that you blush over? Is it something you will leave here determined to try to avoid or something you can't wait to run back to as you leave these doors?

"And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation," Jesus warned Jerusalem. God had come to them in Christ. It was a time for repentance, for salvation by grace through faith in God's Son, and yet they were too distracted and unwilling to give up their pet sins and stubborn ways. And so Jesus mourned for them, because selfishness and stubbornness can only lead to destruction, and it did for Jerusalem, as the Romans not long after Jesus death crushed the city and inhabitants when they rebelled.

This is our time of visitation. The Lord speaks to us. The Lord calls out, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."*** Hypocrites though we might be, let's not be deaf. Who will be our master, the Savior or that from which He came to save us, Jesus or sin? The Great Physician is ready and eager to heal. Will we confess our sickness? What fools we would be not to do so, because new life awaits us in Him. Drown your old Adam again. Drown your sinful nature every day. And while you can't beat your sins, Christ can, and has, nailing them to the tree of His cross, upon which He died for us to live forever.

Welcome to God's house, brothers and sisters, and perhaps some fellow recovering hypocrites. The good news is it's the right place to be. Just remember to bring your hearts and minds as well, and not only your backsides for the pews. It's amazing, after all, what God has done and can do with the hearts and minds of hypocrites, of sinners. Who'd a thunk it, but He goes and turns them into the hearts and minds of His children, His saints. Amen.