

Matthew 22:15-22

The highest concentration of hypocrites in the world has got to be...can you guess?...in Hollywood. A hypocrite is nothing but an actor or an actress. In fact, the word hypocrite in Greek means actor. A hypocrite is a person who pretends to be something, or someone, they're not. The more convincing they are, the more money they make, and the more Academy Award trophies they have on their shelf. No one minds that Hollywood is full of hypocrites. If it wasn't, we wouldn't bother spending our money to watch the movies they make, or the television shows they produce. But no one likes a hypocrite in the church...except maybe for church members who use that as an excuse to stay away. "I don't come to church," is the classic line, "because there are so many hypocrites sitting in the pews." You do know the proper response to that excuse, don't you? "There's always room for one more."

I've never actually heard anyone use that comeback, but Jesus used it. He had no problem calling people hypocrites to their face. In our text He says, "Why do you put Me to the test, you hypocrites?" The men sent by the Pharisees to trap Jesus were handpicked, they were good. But they would not win any acting awards that day. He saw through their sugar-coated words of flattery and easily spotted the evil intent in their hearts. "We know you are true," they told Jesus. "You teach the way of God truthfully...and you are not swayed by appearances." These men were out-and-out phonies. They were hypocrites to the core. They did not believe in their hearts what was coming from their mouths.

What about us? Are we genuine to the core, or is there ever any phoniness about us? The men sent by the Pharisees were hypocrites because they used flattering words of praise in Jesus' presence, but away from His presence their words were just the opposite. If we hold our tongue here in church and speak or sing only the words God wants to hear, but the rest of the week use curse words and foul language, then we're a bunch of hypocrites. If you treat your neighbor with kindness here in church, but in the car on the way home gossip about him or her, then you are a hypocrite. If I preach one thing from the pulpit, but live in the opposite way, then I am a hypocrite. If we come to church on Sunday morning, but wish we were somewhere else, then we're hypocrites. If you or I come up to Holy Communion, thereby promising God that we intend with His help to amend our sinful ways, and yet come up with sinful plans in our hearts, we are hypocrites.

The truth is, we are a bunch of phonies. Here in the presence of God we act a certain way, but at home, with friends, sitting in local restaurants, at school, at work we speak and live in ways which are noticeably different. The words Jesus spoke to the people of God in Palestine are also for us. "You hypocrites!...(You) honor Me with (your) lips, but (your) heart is far from Me."

Now the reason I'm pointing this out today is not so we can spot the hypocrisy in others, but so that we can see the hypocrisy in ourselves. Hypocrites try to fool other people. But it is a deadly game they play, for a hypocrite, in time, will end up fooling even himself. We will end up believing our own lies. We think we are good Christians, that there's nothing wrong with us because here in church we play the part well; yet throughout the week we despise God by dishonoring His Commandments. Repent! We must recognize the hypocrisy that lives within us. We must come down off our high thrones and beg God to have mercy on us poor sinners. The men sent by the Pharisees to trap Jesus refused to repent of their hypocrisy. God forbid that we end up like them.

In God there is no phoniness whatsoever. He is no hypocrite. What He says, He means. And He lives what He speaks. He truly practices what He preaches. Every Commandment that came from the

mouth of God, Jesus kept. Every promise prophesied about the coming Messiah, Jesus fulfilled. You have a God, dear sinner, who speaks from His heart. His words reveal His very heart to us. When He says, "You hypocrites!" He speaks the truth about us, even if we deny it. But when He says, "I am a merciful God who pardons your iniquity," these words of His are just as true, for they are from His heart.

When Jesus came down from heaven to bear our sin and punishment, He was not wishing in His heart that He was somewhere else. God became Man for your sake gladly. When He was on the cross dying for you, there was nowhere else He would rather have been. When Jesus, today, meets us here in worship to bless us with His gifts, He does not wish in His heart that He was someplace else when He sees how insincere we can be. No, He comes here to bless you week after week with joy in His heart no matter how our hearts feel toward Him. And Jesus does not secretly wish that He had never commanded His pastors to absolve the sins of His people when He sees how we continue to disobey Him day after day. There is nothing He loves more than forgiving His sinful people from His heart.

And so you, my friend, you are forgiven because Jesus says so, and He's no phony. "I died for you," are His words in the Bible. "I forgive you all your sins," He speaks through His pastor. And His words are no vicious lie. They are genuine. They are true to their very core. And they reveal exactly what is in God's heart toward you. He forgives you for your hypocrisy, for your out-and-out disobedience, for every sin against Him and against your neighbor...not because of anything in you; not because He sees you trying to do better; He forgives you because He is your merciful Savior...period!

Satan, not Jesus, is the phony. Satan, not Jesus, is the one who is full of lies. He was a liar from the very beginning. When he tells you that you are no hypocrite, that your pastor is wrong, that you do not need to repent, that you're fine the way you are, Satan is lying to you. And when he sees you in distress because of a guilty conscience, he lies to you again. "God cannot ever forgive you for that!" he says. Liar! Satan does not want you to look at the cross of Jesus. He does not want you to be here today. The truth is that Jesus does forgive you; His pardon is here for you now in His Word of Absolution. It is here for you in His Sacrament of His body and blood.

Friend, even your own heart will lie to you. The sentimental saying we sometimes hear is nothing but a lie..."Just follow your heart." But our hearts are sinful. Only God is true. There is hypocrisy and phoniness in everything except for the Word of God. And that's why I urge you to get to know God's Word better. Come to a pastor-led Bible Class, and then study the Word in private. If you have to miss a Sunday service, read the sermon later on the church's website, or ask for the tape of the service. Satan will always pull you away from these things. He will always tell you that you are doing fine; that you have enough of Jesus already. He is a hypocrite! He builds you up with praise so he can tear you apart.

But God is no hypocrite. He is on your side. His love for you never fails. His forgiveness is free of charge and is yours now no matter how sinful you have been. Take these words home with you today and by them you will live. There is nothing false or phony in anything Jesus says. He is the Truth, and He is for you. Amen.