

Hope for Hypocrites
Amos 8:4-7
September 22, 2013

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"— skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done.

In the words of today's sermon text, God is speaking through the prophet Amos. God issues a warning to the children of Israel. The people he had chosen to be his holy people were being anything and everything except holy. God's anger is aroused because the actions of his people and the talk of his people don't line up. They were speaking a good game but playing a dishonest game. In short, they were hypocrites.

At the end of the parable of the Wedding Banquet, Jesus told the people: *Many are called, but few are chosen* (Mt 22:14). That's a scary thought, but it certainly couldn't pertain to good church-going folks. Could it? I once heard a Lutheran pastor paraphrase Jesus words in order to apply it to his church. He said, "Many are cold, and some are frozen."

Today we are going to look at the problem of hypocrisy because, if hypocrisy isn't weeded out of the Christian heart, it can rob the unsuspecting soul of its salvation. Are we, the hearers of God's Word, also doers of his Word? Do we take our salvation for granted? Is our worship authentic and sincere? Is my love for others just theory or is it also practice? Do I give to God and serve others just to appease my conscience or is it truly a sacrifice?

In today's text, God is calling on the Israelites to examine themselves. Today, God is calling on each of us to examine ourselves. "Am I a hypocrite?" That is a crucial question for each one of us, because the hypocrisy God is speaking about can only exist in a person who calls himself or herself a Christian.

It goes without saying that all of us harbor some hypocrisy somewhere in our lives. We're human. It's impossible not to be hypocritical. As the old saying goes: How difficult it is to avoid having a special standard for oneself.

In our Christian lives, hypocrisy comes in two varieties: hypocrisy in worship and hypocrisy in lifestyle. To say that another way: we can be hypocritical toward God and hypocritical toward other people.

Every aspect of the Christian life is to be an act of worship. That means that hypocrisy toward God could take many different forms. One such form would be our worship here in church. When we sing the songs, pray the prayers, confess our sins, hear the Scripture readings, attend the Lord's Table, do we do all these things with a sincere heart? It is dangerously easy for things we do often to lose their significance.

This problem is just an aspect of sin. Therefore, the problem of empty worship is as old as the human race. Cain, Adam and Eve's firstborn, offered an insincere sacrifice to God. That's why God refused to accept Cain's sacrifice.

The Israelites of Isaiah's time also had that problem. That's why God said: *These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men* (Is 29:13).

The religious establishment of Jesus' day had that problem. Jesus spent a good deal of time talking to those who thought themselves to be on track with God, but who were, in practice, bogged down in the mire of earthly trappings. Jesus gave this warning about them. *Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets* (Lk 20:46).

The other style of hypocrisy is toward other people. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. In reality, that means putting others ahead of ourselves. Jesus told his disciples: *If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all* (Mk 9:35).

We can also be hypocritical toward other people by failing to come to their aid through sacrificial deeds. We are the hands and feet of Jesus on this earth. Many of the good things God wants to give to people in need he intends to give through us. Our church is in a prime position to help, but that help can only come if the members of this church step up to the plate.

It's not enough to wish well on those who are living in need of food, clothing, understanding, comfort, or the Gospel message. God wants his people to be people of action. That's why James writes: *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?* (Jam 2:15-16).

Furthermore, we must not be hypocritical by exploiting other people. This can mean exploiting others in a physical or financial way, which is certainly wrong. But we must not overlook the idea of exploiting them in a religious manner. Too many Christian denominations add burdens to the Christian life that make some people shy away from faith. The ones who stay in those churches miss out on much of the Christian joy and freedom because of the man-made rules imposed on them.

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, and every church, must constantly be on guard against insisting on requirements which are not in Scripture. Manmade rules and religiosity water down the pure Gospel message. That's why Jesus warned the church of his day: *You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them* (Lk 11:46).

So what is the cure for the hypocrisy in each one of us and the hypocrisy that may exist in the church? Where can we turn for the medicine we so desperately need?

One thing is sure, the remedy is not within ourselves. We are so infected by sin that anything we might try on our own is doomed to failure. We do not have the power to fix ourselves. As Isaiah writes: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags* (Is 64:6).

The answer, which we cannot find in ourselves, can only be found in true faith which leads to repentance. We are so lost in sin that we can only see our sin through the faith the Holy Spirit brings to our hearts. If we honestly look through that faith and see who we truly are, then the Holy Spirit will give us the power to repent – the power to stop doing wrong and start doing right.

There are four steps required to apply the cure for our hypocrisy. First, **we must give up on ourselves**. Knowing the answer is not within us and not trying to fix the problem ourselves are two different things. It's the difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge. Knowing we are helpless is academic. Trusting God to handle our weakness is a matter of faith.

Step two is **admitting our sinful nature and our actual sins**. We confess our sins in every worship service. However, is that the only time you confess? Furthermore, are your personal confessions general or specific. It's good to stand together and say, "We confess our sins of thought, word, and deed – the sins we know and the sins we don't know." Still, that may not be enough to get to the root of our hypocrisy problems.

After we have used God's Word to identify our hypocrisy, we need to confess it. We need to go to God and tell him exactly how we neglect him and our neighbors. Then, and only then, will the problem be brought out into the light where God and you can work on it.

Third, we must **put our full confidence in Christ's forgiveness**. Some Christians confess a specific sin, but they don't truly believe that God will forgive them. These poor folks don't understand the depth of God's love and mercy. If you aren't fully persuaded that your sins of hypocrisy are forgiven, you will never escape the trap of Satan. You will condemn yourself to repeat the sin.

Fourth, we must **rely on Jesus to empower us to love God and other people**. When Jesus ascended back into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, Jesus lives in each one of us. His presence will enable us to live out our love for God. It will also allow us the strength to let God's love touch other people through our words and actions.

When, with God's help, we have weeded out both areas of hypocrisy from our lives, our new life will be spent in meaningful worship of our Lord and a Christ-like love for other people.

Hypocrisy is just as much a sin as any other sin. God hates all sin. But thank God, that is not the end of the story. With God there is always hope because our God is the God of second chances. In another part of the book of Amos, God announces his hope: *Seek the Lord and live* (Amos 5:6).

The hope that God offered to the Israelites is also ours. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is our hope. Through him we can give up on our own resources; We can confess with confidence; We can believe that God has removed our sins from us as far as the East is from the West; and we can tap into the power of the Holy Spirit that will allow us to love God fully and be little “Christs” in this world.