



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

LifeGroup

March 10, 2024

Luke 12:4-12

Community

TODAY'S THEME

This is not going to be easy! Jesus' disciples are discovering that Jesus' ministry is controversial and causes division. This is the essential growing point for every disciple: “Will you acknowledge me” before one another?

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

True growth almost always includes pain: growing pains. The word “growth” challenges us to consider the integrity of our faith. It holds up a mirror and asks if our actions and attitudes truly reflect what we say we believe. Do our insides and outsides match? One measure of spiritual maturity is when the gap between our stated beliefs and the way we live narrows. Spiritual maturity is the process of becoming more and more like the person God intends for us to become in baptism.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we want to close the gap between what we say we believe and how we live.

INTRODUCTION

“Hypocrisy” is derived from the Greek word hypokrisis, which means “to play a part on the stage,” or “to wear a mask.” In ancient Greek theater, actors were known as hypocrites, without any negative connotation. However, the word came to be used negatively in reference to people whose insides and outsides did not match. A person who professes one thing, but acts in a contrary fashion, is said to be a hypocrite. And the world is full of them.

We've all read the headlines in the past several years. There have been huge breaches of integrity in the financial community. There's a lot of anger toward business and government leaders for saying one thing and doing another. In contemporary culture, there's a lot of mistrust toward Christianity and our hypocrisy of preaching love and acting in hate. There's plenty of hypocrisy to go around: saying one thing and doing another, the gap between who we are and who we long to be. Of course, it's always easier to see it in someone else.

ICEBREAKER

What are some of the masks people wear? Why do you think we're so quick to pick up on the hypocrisy of others, and so slow to address our own? How do you respond to the criticism that Christians are nothing but a bunch of hypocrites? How would you define hypocrisy? Give an example in your own life.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, you know us like no other. You know our flaws and failures, our sins and our shortcomings. We easily confess you as Lord, but find it hard to truly follow. We quickly reduce faith to rule-keeping. We conform to an outward standard, but inwardly we are still filled with anger, jealousy, hatred, spite and bitterness. You call us to live an other-centered life, but the gap grows between what we are and what we long to be. Come close to us in this small group time, and speak forgiveness into our sinful condition. Amen.

Content

Luke 11 tells of Jesus being invited to a Pharisee's house for dinner. Observing that Jesus did not go through the prescribed ceremonial washing before eating, the Pharisees were "amazed." Jesus uses this opportunity to denounce the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Scribes (lawyers). They were fixated on rigid adherence to external things (like washing and tithing), and in doing so were considering themselves righteous. At the same time, they ignored the more important internal issues of the heart: justice, mercy and love. Luke records the Pharisees' and Scribes' intentions to trap and destroy Jesus, rather than allowing his words to drive them to confession and repentance.

In Luke 12:1-4, Jesus is surrounded by a huge crowd. He addresses his disciples – probably in the crowd's hearing – about the hypocrisy, or "yeast," of the Pharisees. Jesus warns his disciples to beware such hypocrisy because, in time, everyone's outer actions and inner intentions will be exposed. If there is a gap between their actions and intentions, they will be exposed as hypocrites.

Our text flows out of this warning about hypocrisy and impending judgment. The signs of hypocrisy include: knowing the truth but not obeying it, living a self-serving life, claiming Christ as Lord without following him, reducing faith to rigid rules, and outward conformity without inner reality.

(Read Luke 12: 4-12.) Against the backdrop of the Pharisees' and Scribes' hypocrisy, and the warning that all actions and intentions will be revealed, Jesus warns his disciples about their own potential hypocrisy. Instead of denouncing the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus now lovingly warns his friends. Oddly, he begins by telling them who they should and should not fear. They are not to fear human enemies who can "merely" kill the body. This is indeed what many of us fear most: physical death. But in the same way that the Pharisees and Scribes were obsessed with external things, so, too, might the disciples be obsessed with the external death of the body. Jesus instead points them to a deeper reality.

While human beings have the power to take our temporal life, God has the authority, or *exousia*, to dictate our eternity, to cast us into hell. The word "hell" here is Gehenna, originally

the location where children were sacrificed by fire to the pagan god Molech, later the location of the perpetually-burning garbage dump out-side of Jerusalem, and eventually a metaphor for a place of eternal punishment. God, not people, is to be feared.

Jesus' warning stems from two things. First, the judgment that will come when our deeds and our inner intentions are exposed (12:2-3). Second, the reality of the choice that the disciples will soon face: deny Jesus and win the people's approval, or acknowledge Jesus and face persecution. Which will motivate their choice? In verse 8, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter: the struggle that the disciples will have as they face persecution for being Jesus' followers. Acknowledging Jesus means to publicly confess a connection and allegiance to him. Denying him means to reject that connection and allegiance. We don't know what it means to be acknowledged or denied by Jesus before the angels. To some, it means that we are no longer saved, yet Peter denied Jesus and was restored. Perhaps "denying" and "speaking a word against" Jesus are the same thing, which Jesus said can be forgiven.

What can't be forgiven, according to Jesus, is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (10). This is one of the most debated and troubling verses in the Bible. The unforgivable sin is attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. It's a deliberate and ongoing rejection of the Holy Spirit's work, cutting us off from the power and possibility of forgiveness and the reconciling work of Christ.

Perhaps Jesus is saying that some disciples (like Peter) will deny Jesus under pressure, but they are not lost. They can be restored. This is a word of hope to later disciples who cracked under the pressure of fear, and the threat of death, and denied Jesus.

In verse 11, Jesus says "when" you are brought before those who persecute you. This is important. Some might think 6-7 tell us that nothing bad will happen because God knows and loves us. That is not what Jesus promises. We are not promised comfort and safety in this world. We're told specifically that we will suffer for our faith. What we are promised is that our reward is in heaven.

When the disciples are confronted and tempted to deny Jesus, they don't need to worry that they won't find the words to defend their faith. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will give us words, not beforehand, but in the heat of the moment.

Notice that what follows our text, the parable of the rich, young fool, is a story which reinforces the key themes of internal versus external, temporal versus eternal, and the things of this world versus the things of God.

DISCUSSION

What are some of the disconnects between our behaviors and our inner intentions? If we cannot close this gap on our own, how does the Holy Spirit work to accomplish this in our life? How do we suffer for our faith? What about others around the world?

GOING DEEPER

Let's look at each one of these signs of hypocrisy more closely.

- **Knowing the truth but not obeying it.** Give an example of what this looks like in your life.
 - **Living a self-serving life.** What would your day planner and your checkbook say about your priorities?
 - **Claiming Christ as Lord without following him.** Give an example of this kind of hypocrisy in your own life.

- **Reducing faith to rigid rules.** What is your most frequent reaction to other sinners: compassion or judgment?
- **Outward conformity without inner reality.** Give an example of this from your own life.

Consider the lyrics of this song: Change My Heart, O God. (Words and music by Eddie Espinoza. ©1982 Mercy/Vineyard Publishing.)

You are the potter, I am the clay;
Mold me and make me, this is what I pray. Change my heart, O God. Make it ever true. Change my heart, O God. May I be like you.

DISCUSSION

How do you think change or growth happens in our lives? Why do you think growth is often painful? Give an example.

Application

Let's make this a "close the gap" week. Identify one aspect of your life in which the gap between believing and behavior is the widest. Examples could be: I believe generosity is a great characteristic but I never give anything away; or, I believe in the power of prayer but I rarely pray; or, I believe it's good for me to eat right and exercise but I rarely do either; or, I believe that time spent with family is most precious, yet my datebook would prove I don't spend much time with my family at all.

Identify the gap, lay it in God's hands, and trust that God, through the Holy Spirit, will do what we cannot do for ourselves. Then see what happens! Report back to the group next week on new growth in your life.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, we know there is a wide gap between who we are and what we long to be. Help us. We wear masks that cover up our real motives and intentions. We hide behind an illusion of self-sufficiency. We dare not expose our real self in fear of rejection or persecution. God, we want to grow, and we know that growth may be painful. By your grace, be at work in us to continually change us into the kind of person you intended us to become in baptism. Amen.

Luke 12:4-12 NLT "Dear friends, don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot do any more to you after that. (5) But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell. Yes, he's the one to fear. (6) "What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? Yet God does not forget a single one of them. (7) And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows. (8) "I tell you the truth, everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, the Son of Man will also acknowledge in the presence of God's angels. (9) But anyone who denies me here on earth will be denied before God's angels. (10) Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. (11) "And when you are brought to trial in the synagogues and before rulers and authorities, don't worry about how to defend yourself or what to say, (12) for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what needs to be said."