

Luke 12:1-12

Hypocrisy

- **is subtle like leaven**
- **is from fear**
- **can be defeated with God**

Hypocrisy, pretending to be something one is not, is used about 30 times in the New Testament in its various forms. Many times, the Pharisees are the target of that unflattering description because, as Jesus vividly illustrated, they loved to parade their religion for all the honor it could get them, while inside they were full of pride and injustice, lacking generosity and kindness. Of course, not all Pharisees were lost causes of hypocrisy; some became Christians. But Jesus spoke of those extreme examples as an illustration of what could happen to anyone whose religion got a little twisted.

Sometimes, Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees to the Pharisees. His point was to get them to look at themselves and the religion they practiced. Their focus on outward purity and legality, while good things, had been emphasized to the exclusion of the inward, like justice and the love of God.

At other times, such as in Luke 12:1-12, the subject of this lesson, much more subtle forms of hypocrisy are described. Here Jesus describes the hypocrisy which can grow in an otherwise sincere and faithful person. Peter and Paul both addressed this same kind of insidious hypocrisy in their warnings to various churches. From those contexts, it is easy to see that blatant Phariseism is not the problem. The danger is from a hypocrisy which slides in, masked by culture, custom, and convenience. In some of the newer translations, it is rendered "insincerity," reflecting the less obvious manifestation of this problem.

In Luke 12, on an occasion for which a location and a time are not given, a large crowd had gathered to hear what Jesus had to say. While crowds often gathered as a result of miracles, either to see the show or to get something, this crowd seemed to expect words, not miracles. Although Jesus had performed many miracles in the weeks and months before this, the miracles seemed to come in flurries. Because there was no television coverage, instant replay had not made miracles the focus at every location.

They came to hear what Jesus had to say. Jesus began by addressing His disciples, with the apparent intention of being overheard by the crowd. It seems that Jesus used this oratorical device so He could make His point without having to qualify everything. He was addressing those who followed Him, so He didn't need to talk about becoming believers, about His own proof. He could focus on the benefits of the believer and let the crowd pick up on those benefits without having to start every paragraph with, "If you were a believer ..."

So Jesus began his description of hypocrisy and how it happens to good people by explaining first that hypocrisy is subtle.

Luke 12:1-3

1 Under these circumstances, after so many thousands of the multitude had gathered together that they were stepping on one another, He began saying to His disciples first {of all,} "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

2 "But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.

3 "Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.
(NAS)

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy. Beware of the influence that the Pharisees' hypocrisy has on disciples of Jesus, an influence that starts out small but grows and pervades all it touches, changing the very nature of what it inhabits, like yeast in bread dough.

Jesus' point is that the hypocrisy around us, even though it may be as obvious as that of the worst of the Pharisees, can corrupt us in very subtle ways. While it may be obvious to us that the front seats in the synagogue and religious titles and loopholes in the Law of God are exercises in blatant hypocrisy, our very association with such hypocrisy rubs off on us in subtle ways.

Now, there is food for paranoia if I ever heard it. We could worry ourselves to death about subtle hypocrisy. But remember, Jesus didn't speak in three verse increments. Beginning in verse 6 He will give the cure. So, instead of building elaborate defenses against being infested with this subtle hypocrisy, which is going to happen if we continue to live among unbelievers, let's focus on how Jesus says to go about arresting its development, knowing that the cure will come along before He quits talking.

So, how do I keep from allowing this subtle infestation? How do I recognize it? Is it like termites? Do I have to wait until part of the house begins to sag? Or can I probe along with an ice pick to find hidden damage? Is there a Chlordane of the soul that will protect me for 15 years or more?

Jesus' method is more like the ice pick. At first, that may sound a little painful. But, if you've ever inspected the timbers in your home, it's kind of fun as long as you are stabbing that ice pick into solid wood. You can really get into it - until that awful moment when the ice pick sinks in about 3 or 4 inches. The sinking feeling in your arm is nothing compared to the one in your stomach. But, at least we don't have to wait until we fall apart. And there doesn't seem to be a way to keep it from happening. Jesus will show us how to probe for those small rotten spots which can be repaired before they become big rotten spots.

So what would motivate us to want to probe for our own rottenness? Wouldn't it be less painful to let it go? After all, the damage isn't visible yet.

Jesus says, recognize that secrets will be revealed. Not that someone will tell on you, rather, at Judgment, there will be no secrets. We might as well root out our subtle hypocrisy now and repent, since the other choice is to answer for it later.

So, should we make it a practice to shout our innermost secrets from the housetops. to expose publicly our little rotten thoughts? Some have advocated that. But that seems to be only a negative version of the Pharisees, flaunting my repentance so everyone can see how religious I am. But should I keep it between me and God only? Probably not, since that's how that leaven got started in the first place, me believing my own excuses. There would seem to be a middle ground. As James wrote (5:16), "Confess your sins one to another." But Paul cautions against negative extremes in Colossians 2:23, "which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion, but are of no value."

Recognizing that hypocrisy will rub off on us from the many examples we see every day, it appears that we do need to root out our own bad motives, our breakdowns between attitude and action. But how? My recommendation, which I believe is consistent with the rest of the New

Testament, is, first, not to try to do it alone, since our track record is poor for self-improvement, but rather to have someone with whom to share those self-examinations, someone who is not afraid to tell you when you are going in circles, either trying to justify bad thinking or trying to root out bad thinking that isn't really there, someone who will listen but not later shout it from the housetops.

Jesus first step in combating hypocrisy is to recognize that it is subtle, rubbing off on us every day. Secondly, Jesus explains how hypocrisy happens to good people by describing that much hypocrisy is rooted not in pride, but in fear.

Luke 12:4-5

4 "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.

5 "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!

(NAS)

Once again, Jesus used an extreme illustration to make His point. Fear of death has caused lots of people to act contrary to their principles. Usually, when people are threatened severely in order to get them to act in ways they do not believe they should, they are being coerced into doing bad things. Obviously, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees was the reverse. Jesus had described (in the previous chapter) their insides as corrupt and their outsides as clean.

So what kind of threat is Jesus illustrating here that would result in believers acting hypocritically? Since this illustration follows on the heels of "shouted from the housetops," I believe that the fear Jesus describes here is the fear of exposure, fear that people will come to know the real me and not like me any more.

That may sound kind of pathetic, but that is how most people think, not just shallow people, not just unbelievers, but believers as well. The catch phrase is "peer pressure." We sometimes act in ways we would really rather not so that other people will accept us, so that people will think well of us, so that people will like us.

Jesus point is, if fear motivates you, as it does most people, then consider what God can do. That may not seem to be the noblest of motives, but if we could always be prompted by those noble motives, hypocrisy wouldn't be a problem in the first place.

So, what fear is it that most often results in hypocrisy for us? Since we live in peace and freedom, I think our best candidate is the fear of being poor. Lots of people have used that excuse not only for unethical or illegal behavior in order to gain money, but also for spending too much time earning money, to the detriment of our obligations to God and family. Jesus says, "If you think being poor is bad, think what God could do if He gets second place behind money."

Are we afraid that, if people knew what we really thought that they wouldn't like us? Actually, that's probably true. But the answer is neither the hypocrisy of keeping bad attitudes to ourselves nor airing our bad attitudes because that's how I really feel. The cure is to repair the bad attitude. Then there is nothing left to fear.

So, how do we motivate ourselves to fix those hypocritical bad attitudes we all harbor? If we could just think our way through them and get rid of them, we would have done it already. Where am I going to get the energy to fix this? Jesus suggests a little reality therapy. Fear God. He knows what has been whispered in the inner rooms. His wrath is a whole lot worse than any repercussions we might experience on earth.

Still, fixing this inevitable hypocrisy seems a daunting task, a Herculean effort. And, judging from our records on such self-improvement tracks as diets, exercise programs, and educational pursuits, the prospects of success seem slim if not non-existent. So Jesus continues with His description of hypocrisy and how it happens to good people by explaining how hypocrisy can be defeated with the help of God.

Luke 12:6-12

6 "Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And {yet} not one of them is forgotten before God.

7 "Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.

8 "And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God;

9 but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.

10 "And everyone who will speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him.

11 "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense, or what you should say;

12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour
(NAS)

How does God help us to defeat incipient hypocrisy? Jesus gave us three ways: 1) God thinks each of us is important; 2) Jesus will defend us in the heavenly court; and 3) the Holy Spirit will assist when necessary.

An important thing to remember here is the audience to whom Jesus spoke. He was addressing His disciples. Promises made to them may not be transferable to everyone, not even to all believers. In fact, promises made to His disciples sometimes were good only for the one occasion. For example, on one occasion, Jesus told some disciples to go out and prepare the way for Him, taking no provisions. They were promised that those in the towns they visited would feed and house them. On another occasion, He told the same disciples to take along lots of provisions because they were going to need them. The occasion is important.

Jesus was speaking to His disciples, but He knew that a large multitude of widely varied spirituality was listening. While Jesus' primary audience was His disciples, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus intended for the crowd to learn something, too. The crowd would understand the difference between general statements of truth (like verse 2, "there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed.") and specific promises (like v 11-12, "the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour").

The first method Jesus gave by which God helps us battle the subtleties of hypocrisy is that He cares for us. If He cares about something as insignificant as sparrows, He must care about us, too.

I think Jesus' selection of sparrows as His comparison to us is particularly apt. In those days, enterprising young people would capture sparrows with nets and put them in little wooden barred cages to be sold on the streetcorner. There were two potential markets. First, the very poor could purchase a cheap form of poultry. Second, rich people could buy them and release them as a sign of good will (a cheap way to appear generous). Either way, the sparrow, not one

of whom is forgotten before God, has a rough way to go: captured, caged, then either eaten or released to start the cycle over. The very hairs on our heads are numbered, but that doesn't mean they won't fall out. Many people have taken the sparrow and the hair illustrations out of context to say that nothing bad happens to truly faithful people. If something bad does happen, it's your faith that isn't right. However, those conclusions are no where near Jesus point. The illustrations have nothing to do with our safety, but with our importance.

Jesus' point is that God thinks you are valuable. That should be motivation to root out that subtle hypocrisy. How does that work? Parents use that line of reasoning on children all the time, especially when the children have been given responsibility and the parents aren't going to be there to watch them. You could send your kids off to college saying, "Study hard so you can learn a lot and improve your mind and get a good job." And we know that that advice will last until the first Friday afternoon. But saying, "Make your mother proud," has a much more lasting effect.

That's what Jesus is doing. "Make your Father proud."

Second, Jesus promises to support everyone who confesses Him before men. He promises to confess them before the angels of God. The image there is of the heavenly court. And if you are there, the implication is that you are going to need a good defense attorney, and maybe a few character references. If you are in need of an attorney and references, there must be some charge against you, which should be no surprise, since nobody's perfect.

This promise is designed as a motivation to root out the seeds of hypocrisy that get rubbed off the weeds of the world onto us each day. That could be seen as a hopeless task, to keep pulling those weeds with no end in sight. It's like spreading dandelion killer on your lawn when none of your neighbors do. The herbicide may work today, but new seeds will blow in tonight. Getting motivated to weed out hypocrisy again can be difficult. So, Jesus promises to be your defense attorney and character reference (and your sacrifice, although that part hasn't happened yet), to make the task seem better than hopeless.

Third, Jesus promised these disciples special help from the Holy Spirit. Such stressful occasions as Jesus described here are ripe for hypocrisy, the kind prompted by fear. We can read in the book of Acts about several occasions at which Jesus made good on this promise.

But does this promise have any meaning for us beyond the record of a promise made and kept? Can we, as today's disciples, make the same claim to the promise of help? Many have made that claim down through history. A great number of clergymen have believed that they did not need to prepare sermons because the Holy Spirit would teach them in that very hour what they ought to say. I would think that such sermons would be truly unforgettable, proper candidates for inclusion in the Scriptures. But history shows us that such sermons tend to lack something when compared to sermons in Acts or the Old Testament prophets that really were prompted by the Spirit.

So is there motivation here for us, today's disciples? That question would also have been on the minds of those in that crowd. Does this give hope for me? Jesus didn't answer the question here. He left the people to ponder: a good thing, I think. It makes us use our heads. Later, the apostles gave appropriate generalizations of the help from the Holy Spirit which is provided to all believers, not just a select few like these disciples, things like assistance in prayer and understanding and a clean conscience: perhaps not so theatrical as the promise made to these disciples, but a promise of help nonetheless.

Hypocrisy is subtle. It is often grown by fear. But God promises the ability to overcome, through Jesus.