

The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (B)

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

Matthew 23.27ff

April 5, 2020 (Palm Sunday)

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' ³¹ "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. ³³ "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?

³⁴ "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, ³⁵ so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ "Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

³⁷ "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. ³⁸ "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! ³⁹ "For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'"

We've been looking at how Jesus Christ taught His closest students, The Training of the Twelve. It looks so often like a bad idea. The crowds crying for His help and attention but He wastes His time with the twelve.

They probably didn't get along. They were of very different political persuasions and there seemed to be strong rivalry and competition among them. They don't appear to have a lot of potential and more than once the Teacher recognizes their lack of trust in Him – they're slow to believe (as He says). AND they don't seem spiritually sharp or very bright – He repeats the same lessons again and again and they remain clueless about even the basic principles.

But, He does plan to put the whole movement into their hands (Mt. 16.19)... and as we've seen... it DOES seem to have worked out pretty well. They were stubborn students but HE was an even more tenacious Teacher and, in fact, an educational ARTIST second to none!

Today, He comes into Jerusalem and He takes aim at the OTHER TEACHERS of the day. He tells His disciples and the crowds as well – these other teachers have good content so follow what they say but DON'T follow how they live. And the NAME He gives to this problem is hypocrisy, the practice of saying the right thing but doing the wrong thing.

It's a problem peculiar to people who have moral standards and spiritual convictions and values. When people don't care... when people have no standards of conduct – those who are apathetic about climate change or homophobia or gender-equality or about immorality or heretical beliefs or drug abuse or sex trafficking – if you're indifferent and totally selfish probably no one will accuse you of this problem.

This sickness only afflicts people with convictions and it doesn't matter if those convictions are Right Wing and Traditional or Left Wing and Progressive – anyone intolerant of wrongs or sins or injustices – anyone who expresses values/beliefs RUNS THE RISK of this horrific, soul-depleting pandemic – hypocrisy.

And one group that's especially famous for it is the CHURCH. "I don't go to church because the church is full of _____." (And finally I am speaking to a sanctuary that is not full of hypocrites – there are only about 15 people here, only 15 hypocrites in the building and all those joining us from home!)

Let's look at what Jesus Christ had to say to people with morals, spiritual people, like you AND ME!

- 1) It's a Multi-Level Malady
- 2) With a Singular Solution
- 3) That Must Be Applied in a Regular Regimen

Palm Sunday is for me always a mixed bag. Jesus Christ enters Jerusalem as the King that He is. The crowds don't really get it. The crowds want to be rescued from the Romans with all their taxes and domination – Gentiles in God's land. The disciples are just star-struck and dreaming of big positions and all that goes with that. AND... behind the scenes a bunch of religious professionals convinced that this young Rabbi from Galilee is doing great harm and has to be stopped or He'll ruin Passover or worse!

The only one who really knows what's happening is the Man on the donkey... the Jokerman.

And He is not laughing. Jesus is weeping over what has become of God's project. Israel has failed so He comes to pick up the baton and finish the mission that Israel could never complete.

He speaks to the crowds about the spiritual state of the Capital City and the clergymen and religious teachers. They had been convinced that the great sins of the Hebrew Church were eradicated. When Israel had bowed down to pagan statues and joined their Canaanite neighbors

in worshipping false gods and even sacrificing their children to those idols – those lessons had been learned and there were NO LONGER IDOLS IN ISRAEL. The magnificent Temple was a shining testament to pure spiritual belief and practice. This is the way Moses intended it to be!

But Jesus sees below the surface. In fact all the idolatry of the ancient Israelites was there... but now hidden from sight. They used to use idols to get to control of the things that would complete them. Offer your precious things to the rain gods so your crops would flourish and then when you had plenty to eat and even extra – you could be safe and secure and happy and dependent on NO ONE – not even God.

Because... that's the goal of life...isn't it? To be in control and keep God happy so He wouldn't interfere in your life. Keep God at arms length – that's the basic goal of life and religion.

And the clergymen and religious teachers and those who followed their example had perfected it and without having to resort to idols. Everything they did was to keep God happy and not interfering.

And Jesus Christ issue to Jerusalem and to her leaders a solemn, tear-soaked verdict. It's a series of seven woes using the same formula, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites..." We included only the last two (vv. 27 and 29) to get the big idea.

Starting in v 13, Jesus shows that they have turned people into idols. They get a sense of control by impressing people with their knowledge of God but they themselves don't use that knowledge to actually relate to God. They recruit people to increase their tribe and have big followings but the recruits become (these are Jesus Christ's words:) "you travel around on sea and land to make one recruit; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." (15)

They use the Temple as a giant good-luck-charm. As long as we have the Temple no harm can come to us and we have everything we need – God can't mess with us because He has to protect His house!"

You tithe down to the penny but you ARE NOT GENEROUS!

You're fixated on outward appearance but you have blocked your souls to God Himself – outwardly impressive and respectable in order to get people to fear you but inwardly... your heart is closed to God.

And you're historical revisionists – sentimental and maudlin kind of patriotism that ignores how it was and ignores how you really are. And He closes with these super strong threats. "From the blood of Abel in Genesis to the blood of Zechariah – it's ALL ON YOU!" It's like saying from Genesis to Revelation – you are the guiltiest generation.

Jesus Christ is looking down the tracks and seeing the slow train of judgment finally about to arrive. In just one short generation, 70AD the Romans will completely destroy Jerusalem and the Temple itself will no longer be a place where they can hide from God and stay safe, in control and independent from Him... the Temple will be totally destroyed.

This is hypocrisy and its fruit.

It's so very possible that we like they, have purged from our lives the gross forms of idolatry – "Look, Lord, we have no statues! So... now ...will you leave us alone?! We do everything You told us to do so NOW can we... You know...get on with life and stop worrying about You interfering with us... making bad stuff happen to us... ARE WE GOOD?"

It's so stupid... and we look back and laugh at them but ... below the idolatry and below the deeper desire to be in control is an even deeper thing and that is this weird ability to lie to ourselves.

I was reading this wonderful book this week... about the worst possible topic. When a writer can make a terrible subject fascinating – that's one mark of a great writer. It's called, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* by Cornelius Plantinga, subtitled, *A Breviary (or Primer) of Sin*. And in the index, he has nothing about this important matter of hypocrisy (the word wasn't even there). Instead, he has a whole section on self-deception.

See that's what hypocrisy really is. Idolatry is the attempt to control the forces that enhance or jeopardize our lives by worshiping statues. But hypocrisy is that form of idolatry that attempts to control our lives and complete ourselves by worshiping ourselves, by lying to ourselves and convincing ourselves that WE ARE IN CONTROL AND ONLY WE CAN FULFILL AND COMPLETE OURSELVES.

When we use our values (whether that's fighting climate change or fighting pornography or false doctrine or fighting racism or corporate greed and income inequality) when we use these causes or values or beliefs to feel good about ourselves – it's a form of "autolatry" – self-worship. And the only way you can go there is by prolonged self-deception.

You have to inwardly convince yourself that you are God (Steve Brown said the Christian life begins with two cardinal truths – "there IS a God and #2, I am not Him!") And it's NOT that the ancient Pharisees set out one day to become God... it's that little by little they lied to themselves to say, "Being seen by others in doing good is so that I can bring glory to God..." and little by little they, "put a move on (them)selves. We deny, suppress, or minimize what we know to be true. We assert adorn and elevate what we know to be false. We prettify ugly realities and sell ourselves the prettified versions."

They felt so good about being noticed doing good by other people ... that they lied to themselves about it being for God's glory... They got high on being noticed...and after they did it again and again, they occupied "a twilight zone in which we make up reality as we go along, a

twilight zone in which the shortest distance between two points is a labyrinth.”

See what Plantinga is saying? We get good at lying to ourselves and we get lost...convinced that the shortest distance between two points IS NOT THE STRAIGHT LINE OF TRUTH but a convoluted maze, a labyrinth of self deception.

And LOOK – I’m speaking from experience here. I know I’ve lied to myself about WHY I do good things because I’m a professional do-gooder. It’s an occupational hazard for me and others in ministry and in the so-called helping professions.

And that brings me to this second (and MUCH shorter point) – what is the singular solution to this awful, insidious multi-level malady of hypocrisy?

Well, it’s the weeping love of Jesus Christ. He alone can set us free from the law of sin and death and self-deceived hypocrisy. He says “WOE!” seven times NOT only to denounce these men who had become poisonous snakes, a TANGLE OF VIPERS, but He is sad for them and for those they’d damaged. “Woe!”

He wants them back with Him. He says, “I, in My divine nature have been watching you for centuries and I wanted to save you from yourselves and your uncontrollable self-deception... You were so into God’s law, God’s mission, God’s values and cause (and how it gave you a sense of respect, impressing others) that you forgot about God, you forgot about ME... but I never forgot about YOU!”

I wanted to come and gather the ones you led astray and gather YOU who forgot God “the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you were unwilling” ...

It’s as if Jesus Christ is saying, “So lost in self-deception that you were unwilling for Me to come after you... BUT I CAME ANY WAY...and here I am.”

I remember reading an article years ago about this very passage, how fire fighters have reported on many occasions that in barnyard fires finding mother hens who in the midst of fires gather their chicks under their wings and stay there... and burn to death and the chicks are found alive.

Jesus is saying, “The house is on fire...in a generation it’ll be gone... BUT I WILL BE YOUR HOUSE – I will be your dwelling place. Your religious mess is desolate and the mission is now out of your hands... AND IN MINE... I love you...I want to shelter you. To save you under My outspread wings... I will face the consuming fire of hell that YOU DESERVE in order to bring you home and gather you – both you notorious sinners (who know “you got nothin’!”) and you self-deceived people with ‘values’.”

And there’s urgency in Jesus Christ’s appeal – “Run under My wings NOW and in the end of history you will joyfully greet Me as the One who comes doing God’s work for all who believe.” And what this means for us is (third and briefest point) there’s a regular regimen, a life a

practice of ridding yourself of hypocrisy. Everyday, I doubt myself and turn to Him. I see my own tendency to turn even the good gifts of God, His values, His laws, all the causes and good things to DO – I see that they themselves ARE NOT GOD.

I can use them to keep God at arms length. Each day I have to come to God dependent as I was on the day I first believed. I have to see Him who came in the Name of the Lord to gather His beloved children from all the nations and from the labyrinth of our self-deceptions. I have to come again and again under the Everlasting Arms of Jesus Christ.

I have to get raw with God. He knows our frame that we are but dust (Ps. 103.14), prone to deep-down, self-deception. He, Jesus Christ wants to rescue us again and again. My value is in His Righteousness, not my causes.

We really do welcome the world. Is the church full of hypocrites – yes, we say but there’s always room for one more. All human beings are prone to self-deception and hypocrisy.

The church is full of human beings and therefore the church is full of hypocrites... BUT Jesus is the Self-Sacrificing Hen and the Tenacious Teacher...so really join us...be gathered in.

Self deception is a shadowy phenomenon by which we pull the wool over some part of our own psyche. We put a move on ourselves. We deny, suppress, or minimize what we know to be true. We assert adorn and elevate what we know to be false. We prettify ugly realities and sell ourselves the prettified versions... We actually forget that certain things are wrong and that we have done them but to the extent that we are self-deceived, we occupy a twilight zone in which we make up reality as we go along, a twilight zone in which the shortest distance between two points is a labyrinth.

- Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* (1995) p. 105

The inward corruption to which Jesus refers in the scathing denunciation in Matthew 23 is not the corruption of deliberate and calculated insincerity. It is the corruption of a sincere and sincerely practiced religion, which is ultimately a supreme manifestation of religious pride... The frightening picture opened up here is that when one recognizes obvious sin one has hardly begun to reckon seriously with this adversary. The open and blatant sinner, the oppressor or the harlot, is indeed a sinner. But it is not here that the genuine depth of sin is revealed, not even if the oppressor be ever so grasping or the harlot ever so shameless. It is in religious persons that the depths are to be seen.

- Geoffrey Bromiley, "Sin", in vol. 4 of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (p. 522)