

As our Lord Jesus drives the merchants and moneychangers from the temple, He cries out the words of Scripture: “My house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.” His strong actions are accompanied by strong words. In quoting the words spoken through Jeremiah about the temple being made into a den of thieves, Jesus is echoing the warning He had given hundreds of years before, a warning against hypocritical faith.

As we look at those words the Lord first gave through His prophet, we’ll see what hypocritical faith looks like, why it is so dangerous, and how the answer to hypocritical faith must be sincere repentance.

The Lord’s accusation through Jeremiah gives us a good picture of what hypocrisy looks like when it comes to faith. One of the first things we see is that this hypocritical faith involves a trust in the outward, the superficial, rather than in the God one claims to believe in. This is seen in the warning given: “Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.’”

The people of Jeremiah’s day spoke these words in response to a grave situation – one of their own making. The people had fallen further and further from the law of the Lord, worshiping idols and committing evils against one another. The Lord had responded in two ways. He sent prophets to call the people to return to Him, and when the prophets were ignored – or worse – He sent enemies to bring His judgment down upon the people.

Even before Jeremiah, God had sent the Assyrians to destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and they had crushed all of the Southern Kingdom aside from Jerusalem itself. During Jeremiah’s lifetime, he would see both the Egyptians and Babylonians oppress Judah, with the armies of Nebuchadnezzar finally leveling Jerusalem and taking the people into captivity in the year 587 BC. So even though the words we hear in our reading come before that final destruction, the people had already witnessed the Lord’s judgment on a great and terrible scale.

Having witnessed this, did the people repent? Did they heed the words spoken through Jeremiah and the other prophets? No! No, they put their trust in “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”

They figure that, because this physical building was in their midst, they’d be okay. God had placed His name there, so surely He’d never let His temple be destroyed or the people around it. They were trusting in the building, not the God who dwelt there.

In addition to trusting in the building, they also trusted in their acts of worship. On the high feast days, they would still go and offer the required sacrifices, sing the required Psalms, mouth the required prayers.

But, as the Lord had already denounced through Isaiah many years before, “these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me.” The

people thought that, if they just went through the motions, that would be “good enough” for God and bring them His favor and blessing.

They did this, because their hearts – at least for some – were convicted by the other part of their hypocrisy. Not only were they trusting the outward things and performing worship that was lip-service and forced action, but they were at the same time placing their actual faith in idols and chasing after the lusts of their sinful hearts.

The Lord accuses them through Jeremiah, saying, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered to do all these abominations’?” The people of Judah were living lives contrary to God’s will for them, breaking the Commandments left and right, and doing all this brazenly and unapologetically.

They knew that what they were doing was sinful; they refer to them as “abominations.” But are they sorry? Do they repent, asking for forgiveness and striving to change their ways? No! They keep on living in wickedness, figuring that, since they live in the same city as the temple and jump through the hoops on the Old Testament equivalents of Christmas and Easter, they’re good to go.

They keep up an outward display of faithfulness to the Lord while their inward desires – and the actions that flow from those desires – are all about false gods, especially the god of self.

These two parts of hypocritical faith – outward faithfulness with inward idolatry – are a temptation for Christians of every day, ours included. We are tempted to put our trust in outward elements of Christianity while ignoring Christ’s Word in our hearts.

Instead of “the temple of the Lord,” we might cry out, “the rolls of the congregation, the rolls of the congregation, the rolls of the congregation.” A person who hasn’t been to church in months, years, maybe more than a decade, despite being perfectly capable of doing so, will think that being a nominal member of a congregation somehow offsets his repeated breaking of the Third Commandment and all the idolatry which he pursues on Sunday mornings.

Or maybe we’d cry out, “Confirmation, Confirmation, Confirmation!” Some Sunday many years ago a person took vows to be faithful to God and His Word, to live according to that Word, to “continue steadfast in the confession of this Church and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it” (to quote the rite itself). Is he still faithful to those solemn promises he made to the Lord God and to his fellow Christians, or have they fallen by the wayside? If faith is just in the outward rite, then it doesn’t matter. “Once confirmed, always confirmed,” to adapt the famous false teaching.

Or perhaps we cry out, “Holy Baptism, Holy Baptism, Holy Baptism!” Now unlike membership rosters and the rite of Confirmation, which are useful but nevertheless human inventions, Holy Baptism is given to us by the Lord Himself. Surely that’s something to have confidence in. And Holy Baptism is certainly a great source of confidence and comfort... so long as it’s rightly understood.

God does indeed save through Baptism. The Bible makes that clear: “Baptism... now saves you.” God grants saving faith, new life, the gift of the Holy Spirit coming to dwell in the heart. Baptism saves.

But once saved doesn't mean always saved. You can lose your salvation. You can cause the Holy Spirit to depart. If the faith granted in Holy Baptism isn't fed and sustained by the Word and Sacrament, it will eventually perish.

To trust in any of these gifts of God while denying or ignoring the Word of God is hypocrisy. The people of Jeremiah's day, and of Christ's, for that matter, made the temple into a den of thieves by thinking that they could hide their wickedness within a show of righteousness in the temple. But as God says, "Behold I, even I, have seen it, says the Lord." Our hypocrisy is not hidden from God, either.

Having heard from Scripture what hypocritical faith looks like, we need then to ask: what makes it so dangerous? Why does the Lord send His prophet into the temple to proclaim this call to repentance? Several reasons exist.

One is the danger of false security which hypocrisy offers. The Lord says, "Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail." Remember, the deceptive, lying words were the cry, "the temple of the Lord." The security people got from those words would totally fail them. Again, in 587 BC, the temple would be completely demolished, the city destroyed, and nearly all the people who weren't put to the sword were hauled away into slavery, many to never see Jerusalem again.

Those today whose faith and worship are only external things will similarly find their security false and unable to save. Remember the words Jesus spoke in the parable we heard two weeks ago: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Another reason that hypocritical faith is so dangerous is that it hardens the heart, both to resist true faith and also to justify sin. If someone finds his security in just externals, if he thinks that jumping through hoops can save him, then what need would he have to struggle with repentance and true faith? If such people think that they can go on sinning, that grace may abound – to reference Romans 6 – then why stop sinning?

Externals are so tempting because they make it seem that we can earn our salvation. As an example from Church history, look at the state of the Church before the Reformation. The common people were deceived into thinking that, as long as they did the required works the church told them to do, they'd make it to heaven. Eventually. After purgatory, of course.

And if you were worried about that, well, you could always buy an indulgence! That led to events such as Luther encountered, like telling a drunk he need to go confess his sin of drunkenness but then being shown a piece of paper by the drunk, who claimed he'd already taken care of it.

We follow in the footsteps of that drunk, as well as the corrupt indulgence seller, anytime we're tempted to think that we don't need to repent because of who we are or what we've done. We might think, "Everyone is doing this sin, so it's okay if I do it because I go to church, unlike everyone else." Or we think, "I know this is wrong, but I really want to do it, so I'll just go ahead and then ask for forgiveness later." That attitude is especially dangerous, because a heart that thinks "I'll repent later" is a heart that isn't sincere about repentance.

In addition to false security and hardening the heart, hypocritical faith is also dangerous because it destroys the Christian witness. If a Gentile had been traveling through Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, and heard the people in the temple speak the First Commandment – you shall have no other gods – and then watched those same people go and offer incense to Baal, what would that Gentile think? He'd think that this God of the Hebrews must not be that great or powerful or worthy of worship, if His own people openly defy Him in His own temple.

This hypocrisy is a danger in this way still today. We spoke about it a little two weeks ago, concerning the danger of a hypocritical witness by parents to their children. Such is the danger that studies have shown that if dad doesn't go to church, there's only a three percent chance his children will. Three percent.

Even outside the family, this effect is easy to see. If Christians say they believe one thing, but then live in a different way than that, they're clearly being hypocrites, and no one openly wants to be a hypocrite. If Christians confess to live for the sake of the life to come, but then spend their time and efforts living for the things of this life, they're either ignorant or just lying, and who would want to be a part of that?

You might sum up the dangers of hypocritical faith by saying that it endangers the salvation of both the one practicing it and the one witnessing it.

When we fall into this temptation, we must repent. And this repentance must be sincere! Note the words of the Lord: "if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment..." Hypocrisy gets a person into this; more hypocrisy certainly cannot get him out!

Merely mouthing the words of the confession does no good; in fact it adds more sin by taking the name of the Lord in vain, as well as bearing false witness against both God and ourselves. No, we need to take the judgments of the Lord seriously, because He is serious – eternally so.

And yet when we do repent in sincerity, when we do cry out not just with our mouths but also with our hearts, our Lord wipes away all our sin. When we confess in faith, and then ask for the strength to bear the fruits of faith, our Lord totally absolves us, before and apart from even one good work.

We are forgiven for the sake of Jesus, whose blood washes away every transgression, cleanses every iniquity. It doesn't matter how many times. It doesn't matter how bad those sins were. Just consider what He says to the people through Jeremiah. If they truly repent and put away their sinful ways, He says, "I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever."

Despite the fact that they had filled the land with idols, despite the fact that they were shedding innocent blood, even that of their own children, despite the fact that they thought they could use the temple of the Lord to hide their wickedness from the Lord, the Lord was ready even then to forgive and restore them. He was ready at the first sound of their repentance to turn from His wrath and bring forth His blessing.

As He had revealed to their fathers and to them, He is the Lord who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

That is still who He is today. Our God has offered up His very life for us on the cross, shedding His blood to cleanse us. When we repent and turn to Him, He is there to gather us again into His loving arms.

The words of Jeremiah fit well with the words of John which we spoke in our Confession this morning. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, but never God. If our faith is hypocritical, the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, if we repent of our hypocrisy, if we ask for the strength to live as our Lord has taught us, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

In the name of Jesus, amen.