

1 Trinity 20 – Matthew 22; Ephesians 5

People respond to God's Word in different ways. Some ignore it or make excuses. Others get angry and even violent toward those who proclaim the Word. Still there are others who outwardly listen to the Word of God, associate themselves with the church, and yet they don't believe it. This is called hypocrisy. It is putting on a mask of piety while not actually caring about the gospel. In Jesus' parable about the wedding feast, the hypocrite gets the harshest penalty, even more severe than those who attacked and killed the king's servants. The hypocrite who sneaks into the wedding feast without a wedding garment is bound hand and foot and tossed into outer darkness where he cries and grinds his teeth.

If this parable strikes terror into you, then that's not a bad thing. Jesus says that many are invited, but few are chosen. If this is terrifying to you, then your reaction isn't unusual. But you should know that our Lord gives us this warning because he loves and cares for us.

If a hypocrite is someone who doesn't believe what he says, then everyone is by nature a hypocrite. Your sinful flesh doesn't believe the gospel, and it never will. Your sinful flesh can get used to being in church, learn to enjoy the music and orderliness of the service, and prefer the company of those who are caring and well behaved. But your flesh will never believe the gospel. St. Paul tell us that the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. So don't expect your natural affections to bring you closer to God. And don't be surprised when you find that your natural affections get bored with God's Word or even angry at it. You are, by nature, a hypocrite.

But that doesn't mean that you are truly a hypocrite. In other words, it doesn't mean that you don't have faith. We know that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We cannot, by our own natural power, do anything holy before God. As we say in the Small Catechism, "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified, and kept me in the true faith." We know that our sinful nature remains weak and unable to believe God's holy Word. Therefore, our Lord has taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come," which happens "when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that, by his grace, we believe his holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and thereafter in eternity."

Many are called, but few are chosen. Are you chosen for eternal life? Are you walking through the narrow gate? Are you on the narrow road? You should ask yourself this question. As St. Paul admonishes us in 2 Corinthians 13, "Examine yourselves to see if you really believe. Test yourselves." If you think you stand, then take heed lest you fall. Do you think you are called because of some quality that is in you? Do you suppose that you've met some special standard that God's kingdom should come to you? Don't fool yourself. Instead, be wise, and understand what the Lord's will is. Don't get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit. In other words, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. Because that is how you know God has called you and chosen you.

You don't know that God has chosen you because of how well you are walking on the narrow way or how determined you are to make it through the narrow gate. Instead, your confidence that God has called you and chosen you is only in this – that he has sent his Son to die for you. He says, "Look! I have prepared my dinner. My bulls and

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fattened calves have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding!” This invitation is how you know you are chosen. This gracious Word of God, who prepared your salvation in the wounds of his Son Jesus Christ, is the only way you know that he has chosen you.

Of course, you should examine yourself to see if you believe it. Examine your life. Repent of your sins. Do the works God has called you to do. Clothe yourself with love and humility toward one another. Follow the example of Christ who blessed those who cursed him and prayed for those who did him wrong. But don't be fooled. You won't find the certainty of your calling and election by how well you find yourself doing these things. The reason God calls you to live in daily repentance and in Christ's example is precisely because he knows that you can't rely on your own strengths and accomplishments.

You should be sure and certain that God has called you to love your neighbor. You should be sure and certain that God has called you to sing hymns, psalms, and the songs of the Spirit. You should be sure and certain that God has chosen and prepared every work for you to walk in. But your certainty does not come from how much you do for your neighbor. Your certainty doesn't come from how well you memorize hymns, Bible verses, and the liturgy. Your certainty doesn't come from how much you achieve by your works.

The reality is that your hypocrisy will still cling to your fallen nature. Even the strongest Christians occasionally feel the doubts of their sinful passions. This is because our sinful passions never believe God's Word. But your faith doesn't come from you convincing your sinful heart to accept God's invitation. Instead, your faith comes from the invitation itself. Your certainty that God has chosen you from before the foundations of the world comes from him calling you through his Word even today. He has called you to be his child. He has called you to dine with his Son. He has called you to buy without money, trusting simply in his free gift of salvation.

When you find your certainty of your salvation in the gracious call and promise of your Savior, then this makes you wise. It prepares you to face the temptations that would draw you away from his Word. And even as this helps you realize and beware of the hypocrisy in your sinful flesh, God's free promise also helps you not to lose courage or be shaken when you see that hypocrisy in your heart. Remember, the heart is deceitful beyond all measure and so wretchedly wicked that no one can quite understand it.

Hypocrisy dwells in our flesh. But for some, this hypocrisy rules them until it has completely snuffed out their faith in Christ. This happens, because they replace God's Word with their own thoughts and feelings. So instead of trusting in God's Word and promise, they trust in what they think and feel. They don't look to what a church is preaching and confessing. Instead, they rely on how that church makes them feel.

Like I said, the sinful flesh is quite capable of enjoying the things of the church, like her music and the company of her Christians. Who wouldn't enjoy the music of the church? J.S. Bach's cantatas and arrangements of Lutheran hymns are enjoyed by all sorts of people, many of whom don't even pretend to be Christians. And who wouldn't enjoy the company of church going Christians? After all, Christians are the best people to hang

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out with, hands down. They are taught by their Lord to rejoice in their suffering and to do good even to their enemies. While many people in society love to slander and demonize Christians out of jealousy, there are plenty of unbelievers who recognize the valuable contribution the Christian church has given to the culture.

But you aren't saved by how you feel about church music. You're saved by the Word of God proclaimed and taught in these hymns and psalms. You also aren't saved by your high opinion of religious people. You're saved by the Lord Jesus whom they confess. If being in church makes you feel good, that's great. If you like being around your fellow Christians, then that is certainly a blessing. But when you begin to rest your salvation on these experiences, then you are running into trouble. Because you aren't relying on the Word and invitation of God. The more you rely on how things make you feel, the more you keep chasing these spiritual highs. All the while, your understanding of God's Word suffers, and your faith disappears like vapor.

Don't be foolish. Instead, make use of the time to hear God's Word. Pay attention to the words you sing in this place, and learn from them. Learn from your fellow saints when they stand on the Word of God. And consider what God gives you in this Sacrament of his Son's body and blood. Listen to his words, and sing along in your heart. His invitation for you to eat and drink is itself the pledge and seal of his favor toward you. Of course, you should examine your own heart. Examine your life. Prepare yourself to receive this token of forgiveness and salvation. But in doing this, listen and take to heart the testimony of Jesus' words. This alone makes you worthy and well prepared.

You were clothed with the wedding garment of Christ when you were baptized. You continue to wear it as you rely on his own words and promises. Yes, the hypocrisy of your sinful flesh still clings to you. Be honest about this, but don't despair. Don't try to cover yourself with your own show of piety. That would only be giving into hypocrisy. Instead, clothe yourself with what Christ invites you to enjoy from him: mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Seek to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven you. Put on love, which binds us all together as we bear with one another's weaknesses. And let the peace of God rule your heart. Let the Word of Christ dwell in your richly. In this way, you will have certainty when God says, "All things are ready. Come to the wedding!" Let us pray:

Naught have I, O Christ, to offer
Naught but Thee, my highest Good.
Naught have I, O Lord, to proffer
But Thy crimson-colored blood.
Thy death on the cross hath Death wholly
defeated
And thereby my righteousness fully
completed;
Salvation's white raiments I there did obtain,
And in them in glory with Thee I shall reign.

Therefore Thou alone, my Savior,
Shalt be All in all to me;
Search my heart and my behavior,
Root out all hypocrisy.
Restrain me from wandering on pathways
unholy
And through all life's pilgrimage keep my
heart lowly.
This one thing is needful, all others are vain;
I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain.
Amen.