

"But Their Heart is Far From Me"

People are great at appearances. That's because people care about first impressions. No matter how many times you were told growing up, "Don't judge a book by its cover," the reality is that people do all the time. We live in a world where appearance can be everything. Where people judge you by the clothes you wear, the car you drive, the way you keep yourself, even how you speak and act. Society tells us that the outward and external is so very important.

And yet, even society can tell a fake. You've probably met someone before who had the outward appearance of being rich, famous, and smart, the appearance of being a somebody, but really wasn't. Once you got to know them, you realized that they were a fraud. Or maybe you've met someone who gave the appearance of being loving, kind, caring, and compassionate, but when you really got to know them, you realized that was all a front; outward things they use to try to manipulate people, but inside there is nothing but selfishness.

This is the issue that Jesus is dealing with from a religious perspective in our passage. Jesus is confronted with the Pharisees and scribes who in the name of religion outwardly adorn their every action. They even created rules on top of God's rules to make sure they didn't come anywhere close to breaking God's laws. And yet, as we will see, their behavior was all external. Their outward actions had the appearance of godliness, but there was no true inward godliness. Instead their hearts were hardened. Jesus condemns this as hypocrisy. And he says that it is worthless. All the ways they adorned their external behavior was in vain. Right behavior, even if in conformity to God's laws, is meaningless if there is not an underlying change of heart. All this is summed up by Jesus' quote of the prophet Isaiah in verse 6: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

And as we think about Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees, we recognize that this is a teaching lesson for the disciples as well. If the Pharisees' problem here is their hard hearts, then we are reminded that last week we saw in chapter 6, verse 52, that the disciples still had too hard of hearts. That caused the disciples to have trouble understanding Jesus and his miraculous powers. The disciples will again in this passage, in verse 18, show that they have trouble understanding Jesus. So this is not just a lesson for the Pharisees, but it's also a lesson for the disciples. And if that's the case, it means it is also a lesson for each of us today. We all need to think about the difference between our outward appearances and true internal change of heart.

And so let's begin by looking at the complaint raised by the Pharisees in this passage. We see this complaint in verses 2 and 5. In verse 2, the Pharisees notice that some of Jesus' disciples were eating bread with unwashed hands. To the Pharisees, this was seen as violation of their Pharisaical laws. And so in verse 5, the Pharisees and scribes confront Jesus over the behavior of his disciples. They charge Jesus with allowing his disciples to violate the tradition of the elders.

Notice that the Pharisees do acknowledge that it is the tradition of the elders, and not the written commandments of God. However, by calling it the tradition of the "elders" they are giving it weight. In actuality, the Pharisees held to an

oral tradition of interpreting God's written word. They believed this oral law had been passed down from Moses himself. And so for them, this tradition of the elders was something authoritative.

And what the Pharisees were specifically complaining about here was their tradition on ritual purity. Mark tells us a little bit about in verses 3-4. Mark gives us a snapshot of the extreme nature of their ritual purity - they would wash everything - themselves, cups, pitchers, copper vessels, couches - you name it. They had lots of regulations about ritual purity. And certainly there was some biblical basis in the Old Testament for ceremonial cleanness, but they were taking this way beyond the Law of God. They would add rules on top of rules. For example with the hand washing - yes it's a good idea to wash your hands before you eat, but the Pharisees were basically enforcing certain biblical commands for *priests* to wash their hands before doing their priestly duties in the temple, and enforced it on everyone (c.f. Ex 30:19, 40:13, Lane 245) in a much broader set of circumstances. By doing this, they were not only overly concerned with the outward appearance of purity, but as we'll see, they actually missed the real intention of the ceremonial laws in the Old Testament - to point to our need for internal cleansing and purity!

So how did Jesus respond to this charge by the Pharisees? Well, first he charged them with adding to the law. In the second half of verse 7, he applies the words of the prophet Isaiah to them. He basically says that the Pharisees and scribes were "teaching as doctrines the commandment of men." In other words, they were taking man-made laws and rules, and proclaiming them as authoritative. They were putting them on par with the rest of the Scriptures.

That's why Jesus in verse 8 refers to these laws as the "tradition of men." Notice that he doesn't give them any undue compliments. He doesn't call them the tradition of the *elders*, but the tradition of *men*. Then in verse 9 he calls them "*your* tradition." In other words, Jesus makes it abundantly clear: these are not God's laws. These are not some time honored tradition of the saints in how to rightly understand and apply God's laws. These are a perversion of God's laws made up by man.

Jesus' critique of their laws then goes a step further. He basically says that they are effectively trying to *replace* God's laws with man-made ones. It's bad enough to *add* to God's law. It's bad enough to add to God's revelation. But it's even worse to try to replace God's law with your own man-made ideas. That's what Jesus says in verse 8. He says that they are "laying aside the commandment of God" for the sake of the tradition of men. And so the Pharisees' regulations on ritual purity actually served to displace God's laws, not to protect them. That's because their added laws missed the point of God's ceremonial laws. God is ultimately concerned with our hearts. He wants us to have pure and clean hearts.

And so that's ultimately how Jesus responds. He responds by calling them hypocrites. They had done everything they could to make their outward acts and appearance look pure and clean, but they didn't look to the heart. And so fundamentally, the problem with the Pharisees was hypocrisy. They were concerned with only outward observance of man-made laws, and at the end didn't actually keep God's laws at all. If they had, they would have paid attention to their hearts. They would have looked to make their hearts pure and clean before the Lord. That's what is at the heart of this Isaiah prophecy in verses 6-7. Jesus calls them hypocrites before he quotes Isaiah. Outward physical purity is meaningless if there is not inward purity. All the Old Testament laws of purity were looking toward the heart!

Jesus gives them an example of their hypocrisy in verses 10-13. Jesus quotes two actual commands in God's word: The fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments, about honoring your father and mother, and a related law about not cursing your parents from Exodus 21:17. The very fact that God's Old Testament Law required the death sentence for cursing a parent shows that these were serious commands. However, Jesus then refers to a practice by the Pharisees that pretty much allowed a person to completely nullify this law to honor your parents. Basically, the Pharisees had a practice where someone could formally take the honor due to their parents and transfer it to God as an offering. That's what the word "Corban" means here in verse 11. It's the Hebrew word for offering. So the Pharisees provided a way for people, in the name of godliness, to break God's law.

God's command requires people to honor their parents. At that time, that often meant financial sacrifices as children would financially take care of older parents. But this provision by the Pharisees would allow the children to get out of that responsibility - devoting that benefit to God. Sacrificing that to God. But from my research, it's not entirely clear to me how this would actually be sacrificed to God, and that's because every single commentary I read said that this offering didn't obligate the person to actually give anything to the temple or to God. It just seemed to get people out of taking care of their parents. That's horrible. That shows where someone's heart really is! And Jesus says in verse 13 that this makes the word of God of no effect through their tradition. In other words, Jesus shows with this example how their hypocrisy actually does away with God's word, instead of protecting it. And this is just one example among many, according to Jesus. How horrible.

Then in verse 14, Jesus' response to the Pharisees takes on a bigger perspective. After responding to the Pharisees, he calls the multitude to him and gives them a sort of parable in verse 15, "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man." Clearly Jesus still has in mind the discussion with the Pharisees and scribes when he gives this parable. This is a parable about eating. The Pharisees had just accused his disciples about their practice of eating. They had accused the disciples of becoming defiled by what they ate, because they did not wash their hands first. Jesus says it's not what goes in, but what comes out, that is defiling.

And we have the benefit of receiving Jesus' infallible interpretation of this parable when his disciples later ask them to explain it to them. Of course in verse 18 Jesus again rebukes the disciples for their lack of understanding. Remember, they didn't *understand* the miracles in last chapter because of their hard hearts. Now they don't understand the parable, a very parable which talks about problems with the heart! But thankfully, their lack of understanding here means that we get to hear Jesus' explanation of the parable.

Jesus explains first the outward meaning of the parable. Physically, Jesus gives a lesson on ingestion, digestion, and elimination. In verses 18 and 19 he very vividly describes the process of eating something, which then travels into the stomach, and ultimately out of a person, literally, into a latrine or toilet. This is all very graphic imagery, but the point Jesus makes is that it's what comes out of people that is defiling and not what goes in. This is visibly true in the process of eating and then later going to the bathroom.

Of course, Jesus then turns to give the inward spiritual meaning of this parable. He's not really concerned with biology and potty talk. He's concerned about people's spiritual estate; about their hearts. You see what's the source of our depravity? Is our sin and depravity something that flows into us from the outside,

or something within us that flows out of us? According to Jesus, it starts within us. That might be a bit unsettling to you. But the testimony of Scripture is that after the fall of man, humans are sinful, fallen, and depraved. We have lost that moral purity we had in the Garden of Eden before we sinned. Our moral purity became defiled, and so our hearts since then have been hard and dead. We have had black hearts full of sin and depravity. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" We call this a sinful nature. Without Christ, we are prone to sin and rebellion against God. And if our sinful natures are allowed to continue without intervention, they ultimately result in eternal damnation.

You see, our real problem as humans, is that we need new hearts. Until we get a new heart, we will continue to live in sin without real, genuine, remorse. Jesus lists some of those sins in verses 21-22. Jesus says that it is not the sins themselves, the outward actions that are source of our defilement. No, they are the symptoms of the problem. They are like the smoke of a fire. If you try to fight a fire, you don't throw water on the smoke, you throw it on the fire. The smoke of a fire is like the sins in our lives. They testify to an underlying problem. It is the inward condition of our sinful hearts that yields these sins.

Now don't get me or Jesus wrong. It's not that Jesus doesn't care about how we live. He clearly cares about sin. He clearly wants us to turn from sin. He wants our outward living to be changed. How do I know that to be true? Just look at this long list of sins that Jesus gives in verse 21. Jesus obviously cares about godliness and identifies some of the most common sins of people here. He starts by mentioning evil thoughts - certainly that is where so many sins begin, we conceive of the evil in our hearts and minds, and then execute it. Jesus mentions two specific sexual sins here: adultery and fornication. Adultery of course involves breaking the marriage covenant, having sexual relationships with someone else's spouse. But the word for fornication, *porneia* in the Greek, is a much more general word. Sometimes it's translated as sexual immorality. Basically the word refers to any sort of unlawful sexual relationship. I'd refer you to the various biblical passages that set out what are lawful and unlawful sexual relationships: dealing with things like incest, prostitution, homosexuality, polygamy, bestiality, etc. These all are embodied by this word *porneia*. Jesus also mentions murder, any unjust taking of life. He mentions theft, i.e. stealing, which is closely related to coveting, which he also mentions, which is in a sense stealing in your mind, by not being content with what you have but wanting what others have. He mentions wickedness, which is a very general word for all sorts of evil acts. He mentions deceit, which is basically describing the character of someone who regularly lies and deceives people. He mentions lewdness, which is a general word dealing with a lack of self-control in our lives that displays itself by running to fulfill whatever sort of perverse desires or lusts we may have. When he mentions an "evil eye" that's basically referring to envy, which is a close cousin to covetousness. Blasphemy here can be translated more generally as slander. Blasphemy here refers to speaking out in a slanderous way against someone. We generally think about that in terms of speaking out against God, but you can certainly slander others as well. Pride is self exaltation and arrogance, giving ourselves undue honor. Foolishness is the sort of folly we see in the Proverbs; the fool who says in their heart there is no God, and lives accordingly, not according to God's moral wisdom but man's.

So that's a quick summary of these sins that Jesus mentions. Jesus obviously identifies these as sin. And I walked through these sins because I want to make clear that Jesus doesn't want us to be practicing these things. Jesus doesn't want these to be flowing out of us. But the solution is not to merely find good habits in your life to keep you from doing these sins. The solution is not just external behavioral change. Even if we could stop doing all these sins in our lives by

getting into good habits with practical steps, we would still fall short of God's glory. We would still be defiled and impure. Why? Because our hearts would still be defiled and impure. The fundamental solution is not outward behavioral change, but a spiritual heart transplant. That's what we need. We need new hearts. We need the new hearts that come from being born again. If our hearts are changed, then the behavior will follow.

And that means we need Jesus' grace. We need his grace which comes in the form of a gift, the gift of a new heart. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, he now offers us a new heart and a new life. When we come to Jesus, we ultimately realize that it's because he first came to us. He regenerates our hearts by his spirit. He takes away our hard hearts and gives us new ones. He turns us from being dead in sin and makes us alive in him. He has made us into a new creation. He has made us to be born again. That is what our need is. We need spiritual regeneration. We need a spiritual heart transplant! And that is the work of Jesus in our lives! Praise the Lord!

You see when we look at the Old Testament and see the ceremonial laws of cleanness, we see in our passage two ways to respond. We could respond like the Pharisees and scribe, or we could respond like Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes took the ceremonial laws of cleanness in the Old Testament and made outward ritual purity an end in itself. Everything to them became about external cleanliness. They wanted purity. They did not want to be defiled. But they did this by addressing the outward purity, by cleaning the outsides. And so to that end, the Pharisees invented more and more man-made laws of cleanness, so that they would be so physically clean that they'd never come close to breaking the actual laws of ceremonial cleanness set out by God. And yet, sadly, in doing so they actually did break God's laws. They broke them because they failed to understand them properly. The Pharisees who wanted so much to be clean and pure were actually the ones who were defiled, not the disciples. They were defiled because they needed to clean and purify their hearts!

Jesus, on the other hand, shows that he did rightly understand the Old Testament ceremonial laws of cleanness. He understood that they were not an end in themselves, but that they pointed for man's need for inward purification. These outward laws of cleanness showed that man needs inward cleanness. So Jesus didn't come to abolish the Old Testament ceremonial laws of cleanness, he came to fulfill them. He understood the intention of these laws and brought them to their final fulfillment. That is why he and the apostles declared all foods clean. Because once he came bringing a way to be inwardly clean, we no longer had need for the mere external ordinances. So in the Old Testament, the ceremonial laws showed our need to be made clean, and when Jesus came he brought the means for us to be made clean! Himself!

Trinity Presbyterian Church, are you looking to please God through external behavior change? If so, I would counsel you: external acts of godliness mean nothing, if they do not come from a changed heart. They are literally in vain. That's what Jesus tells us in this passage. That's what he says when he quotes the prophet Isaiah. They are in vain. It is vanity of vanity to chase after external behavioral changes if there is not a change of heart. Instead, we need to go to Jesus. We need to go to Jesus and look for him to change our hearts. That's where we need to start. Because if our hearts are corrected, then our external behavior will follow. If our hearts are changed, then our actions will be changed.

Think about an example. Take a well. If the water in the well is diseased, you could pull up a bucket of water. You could treat the water in that bucket, and then safely drink it. But that doesn't solve the problem. That's a sort of band-

aid solution. The real solution would be to find the source of the water that feeds the well. Then if you cleanse and purify the water at the source, the problem is solved. Then every bucket of water that you pull up will be clean water, safe for drinking, and not needing to be treated.

That is what Jesus does in our hearts. He purifies them. Stop trying to please God by external outward changes. That's the danger in churches. You can come into a church, and see people trying to live godly lives. You can say, well I want to be like them. I want to look godly. And you then might try to order your life in such a way to give the appearance of godliness. But if you didn't address your heart in those changes, then that is just like what we talked about when we started this sermon. People in our society dress up their outward appearances to give good impressions and to present a certain image. People can do that in church as well - dressing up their behavior to look more godly. But just as society can recognize a fake, so God recognizes a spiritual fake as well. God looks at the heart. He doesn't judge a book by its cover. He knows if we are just faking it.

But that's exactly the point. Our loving and gracious God doesn't want us to just adorn our outward actions. He doesn't want us to just put up a spiritual front of being godly. He wants us to be broken and realize that our actions aren't good enough. That no matter how hard we try on our own strength, we can't measure up to God's standards. As we come to realize that, that's when we begin to realize that God is working on our hearts. God is changing our hearts. Our outward godliness must come from a changed heart if it is going to mean anything!

So, let's not try to fake godliness. Let's be more concerned about our insides than our outsides. That might even mean certain sins will remain in your life for a time while you deal with your heart. That might sound shocking to some of you. But the point I am making is that our sanctification doesn't happen overnight. It's a process. But it's not a process of behavior but a process of the heart. The behavior will follow the heart.

And indeed, Christ calls us to live Godly. He does care about our behavior. We've seen in this passage that he wants us to do away with sin in our lives. He wants us to do away with selfishness, with hatred, with lusts of the flesh, and lusts of the world. He wants even our behavior to be following God's laws. He wants us to change our behavior! Actually, more accurately, he wants to change our behavior - the focus is put on *his* work in our life. He's making changes in our life, but he's doing it by working on our hearts. He's the great spiritual cardiologist, so to speak. Yes, from our human perspective, we are to strive for godly living, but do that with the mindset that any successes are a result of his work on your heart. That means that he gets the glory as you see outward changes in your life. When you see outward changes in your life flowing from inward changes in your heart, praise him. He gets the glory.

This is the sort of purity and cleanness that we should all desire. Not merely external change, but true, internal, deep change, wrought by Christ! And he will one day bring this change to completion. Our sanctification starts when he regenerates our hearts, and it is completed when he comes again to bring us to glory. Look forward to that day. It will certainly come. Amen.

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