

It's the Heart that Counts

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'm sure we've all done this before, but there are times when we're so focused on the details that we lose sight of the big picture. Or, take family traditions where we stick so fastidiously to these traditions that we have in the family from generation to generation, when even we may have forgotten why we keep doing them.

Now, I once recalled planning a once-in-a-lifetime family trip and being so committed to taking off everything on not just my bucket list, but everyone's bucket list, that the itinerary was so full, I'd lost sight of why we're on the holiday in the first place, which is to enjoy time together as a family.

So packed was the plan, rushing from one venue to the other, that it left no time to relax and savour the moments.

Well, today, Jesus actually accuses the Pharisees of something similar, of being so fixated with the peripheries, things on the edges, that they forget why they're doing it in the first place.

But worse, actually, Jesus points out something more sinister, and that is the true reasons for their actions which lurk in their hearts.

[1 : 3 0] And so the encounter begins in verse 1 with the Pharisees confronting Jesus about his disciples' behavior, or errors. The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law, we read, who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around Jesus, and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

In brackets, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash, and they observe many other traditions, such as washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.

So, the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating their food with defiled hands?

So, this is really the first of two examples, pitting human traditions against God's commands. And the Pharisees' assertion here is that if you eat without washing your hands, then even if the food is clean, you become unclean or defiled by your unclean hands.

And notice here that we're not talking about hygiene, you know, which when we parents ask children to do, it's actually for their own good, because otherwise, you know, they're going to have a tummy ache.

[2 : 5 5] And so, please, I know your parents have told you this already, keep washing your hands before you eat, particularly if you're touching the food directly. And certainly, if you're cooking any MGG meals, please wash your hands.

But the text here says that it's not about hygiene, is it? But ceremonial washing. They were doing this for ritualistic reasons. Not just to their hands, but cups, pitchers, and kettles as well.

Thus, this act of washing was trying to be clean spiritually, not physically. Now, if you were here last year when we looked at Leviticus, you might recall that God did prescribe certain animals as clean and others unclean.

And he did say, only eat the clean animals. So, it is true that God did classify things in the Old Testament between clean and unclean, and gave laws to Israel to observe as part of their worship of him.

But this particular practice here is not a command from God. But merely, as it says there, a tradition of the elders. There are no Old Testament commands that prescribe washing of hands between eating.

[4 : 12] Yes, priests were required to wash their hands as a form of ritual cleansing before entering the temple. Yes, that's in the Bible. But that was not for everyone.

And that had nothing to do with eating. So, this is an extra tradition that was made up by the elders, which perhaps they may have borrowed from this law about the priest, in order to show, or ask people to show how zealous they were, to be clean spiritually before God.

Now, they may have been very sincere in doing that at the start, but I think what happened over time is that it took on a significance of its own. So that it came to be seen that unless you wash your hands before eating, you were defiled and unrighteous.

It no longer was an expression of their true worship of God, but became a substitute for it. Something they only needed to do, and all they needed to do was that, and then they could consider themselves righteous.

And all this at the same time, when I think people also stopped doing what really mattered, and that was to honour God by obeying His commands, and not mere human traditions.

[5 : 29] But they still thought that they were fine, because, hey, we're obeying the tradition of the elders. And these teachers of the law said that that's all that we needed to do.

But Jesus looked past these traditions, in verse 6, and He replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. And it is written, These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts, their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules. You have let go of the commands of God, and are holding on to human traditions.

You see, Jesus could tell that their external piety, religious practice, and it wasn't just hand-washing, it could have been how they prayed in public, their tithing, that despite all these external observances, their hearts, their hearts were not right before God.

And what was this telltale sign right here? Well, it was the fact that the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for not fasting, for sorry, for failing to do what was not even a command from God, but a mere human tradition.

[6 : 48] Jesus could tell, from how they criticized the disciples, that their heart was actually not in the right place. And so, Jesus calls them out rightly as hypocrites. And the definition of hypocrisy is simply to hide what's truly going on in our hearts and minds with external actions that suggest the opposite.

It's a form of deception, really. And sometimes, we can be so convincing that even the hypocrite is fooled by their own actions.

And so, the Pharisees, I think, really thought that they were devout, they were righteous before God, when in reality, they were far, they were far from it. Because not only were they focused on the wrong thing, that is human tradition, instead of God's commands, but more importantly, their heart was not even in the right place.

What they cared about, really, was to impress others, and not really to honor and please God. And friends, I think, you know, we can be quite judgmental of the Pharisees, but we are susceptible to, aren't we?

And particularly as Christians, because we Christians, we have quite a few traditions, don't we? Traditions are simply habits which a church or a Christian community decide to adopt communally.

[8 : 10] And sometimes, we turn them into rules. And so, it might be things like tithing, making sure you do your daily devotion, giving things up for Lent, I see a lot of that on Facebook at the moment, regular church attendance, or Instagram, sorry, I know most of you are no longer on Facebook.

These are good practices and traditions, these could be good practices and traditions, if done with the right attitude. But equally, we could easily become like the Pharisees, can't we?

Just going through the motions, not really having the right attitude when we do them. And then when we start comparing others to us, and we start to look down on them and say, oh, they're less spiritual because they don't do them like we do, then we're guilty, aren't we, of becoming like the Pharisees.

Now, as if to prove the hypocrisy of the Pharisees more clearly, Jesus now brings up his own example. Verse 9. And so, Jesus continued, you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God, in order to observe your own traditions.

So, see that same comparison again? God's commands, human traditions. And then he goes on to say, for Moses said, honor your father and mother, and anyone who curses their father or mother, is to be put to death.

[9 : 29] Now, that's a command, Moses said it, but it's actually a command from God, found in Exodus. And then Jesus says, but you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother, is korban, that is devoted to God, then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.

Thus, you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that. You know, that's sort of like Jesus' throwaway comment, you know, I've got so many more examples, many things like this, but you know, I'm just going to stick to this one example, just to prove my point.

Now, to see what's going on here, we need to understand this concept of korban. And so, I'm going to try and give you a scenario to explain that. And so, let's say there's a wealthy, self-made man, Jewish man, whose parents were poor, and needed help financially.

But for whatever reason, he decided that he doesn't want to help them. Now, at the same time though, he wants to look good. He wants to impress others, and have them think that he's righteous.

So, what he does is, he uses this practice of korban. That, the word korban is simply the act of making a vow, or to devote something to God. And, once you devote something to God, then it belongs to him, and it's off limits.

[10 : 46] Can't be touched, right? So, let's say he says, my land and property are now subject to korban. So, even though, I really do love my parents, I can't really help them.

Because, God comes first. And so, people will hear that and go, wow, such a holy man. He wants to honour God so much that, he even forgoes helping his parents.

Now, of course, we know that that's a bit of a nonsense, isn't it? Because God wants for this man to honour him, how? By honouring his parents, right? That's one of the Ten Commandments.

But, perversely, you know, and this is, so, so beautiful. Even though the land is korban, you know, he hasn't sold it, so he can still work the land, and he can still enjoy the fruit of it.

So, really, this vow has not really cost him anything. But, you know, wow, such a sacrifice. That's the sort of scenario that Jesus is talking about here.

[11 : 54] And, he actually, chastises the teachers of the law for this. They are complicit, because, if you note in verse 12, he actually says that, it's you, the teachers of the law, who make these rules around korban, which you then not allow someone else to follow, right?

Allow someone else to help their father. So, it's actually the teachers of the law that interpret these rules, and somehow, say that to, the rules of korban actually takes precedence over God's commands of honouring your father and mother.

That's the thing that Jesus was upset with them about. And, they have elevated the human traditions that they've created, used vows which are really voluntary, to then avoid obeying God's word.

And, all the more because the intent to devote something to God, has really, at the heart of it, nothing to do with honouring God.

You know? But, instead, is to avoid the cost of having to help your parents, whom you should love, whom brought you up. And, Jesus pulls no punches with this.

[13 : 05] He says, this is evil. It's not just uncaring, it's evil. And, he says, you're capable of this, because, at the heart of the problem, is the problem of your heart.

And, if you're familiar with that phrase, it's because, you might have done CE before. So, now, Jesus gets to the heart of the problem, and he doesn't just declare this to the Pharisees.

No, he says, actually, verse 14, he calls the entire crowd together, to give them this lesson. And, he says, listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them.

Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. Now, when we hear that, we may go, that's pretty obvious. But, we very soon read that the disciples were actually confused by it.

Now, I think they actually know what was being referred to with the things going in. Jesus was just talking about that with the Pharisees. It's about the food. But, I think what they were confused with was, what is the thing that's coming out?

[14 : 16] You know, is Jesus talking about the toilet? You know, I didn't really want to go there, but since Rihanna already started that, so. In which case, everyone would be defiled, wouldn't they?

Now, of course, we can see where the confusion lies, don't we? Jesus was speaking physically with one thing, and then changing to talk spiritually with the other. And, they were mixing the physical up with the spiritual.

They thought, rightly, that he was speaking about food, which is physical, and therefore, he must also still be talking about the physical, when it talks about things coming out.

And so, what they have failed to realize is, actually, Jesus has changed, and he's talking about something else. And so, now that they were alone, or later when they were alone, Jesus explains it to them.

Verse 17, after he had left the crowd, entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Are you so dull? He asked. Let me first give you an anatomy lesson.

[15 : 21] Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart, but into their stomach, and then out of the body. We all know that.

And in saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. Now, this seems pretty obvious. You know, most of us eat and know what happens afterwards. But, this was not just a thing that the disciples were confused by, because Israel, in general, were confused as well.

Because otherwise, why did they think that merely washing hands physically would make them clean spiritually? They must have thought, somehow, that doing these things, physically, would translate to spiritual cleanliness.

They had conflated the physical with the spiritual. And yes, in the past, in the Old Testament, God did want them to observe these food laws. Not the washing of hands, but the eating of clean and unclean food.

Not because the food themselves, you know, whatever the animal was, was somehow spiritually unclean. But rather, the clean and unclean animals, were meant to signify, or demonstrate, a deeper reality.

[16 : 33] To show them that, in God's world, things, purity and holiness mattered. That there were things, that were unclean, and sinful.

And then there was God, who was holy, and pure, and righteous. And in order for anyone, to come before God, they too, needed to be clean, and holy, and pure. And these food laws, in the Old Testament, were meant to be like visual aids, to help them see, and remember, these unseen, spiritual realities.

Israel was not meant to obey these laws, mechanically, but to reflect on them, so that, as they do, and they look at them, they go, oh, okay, what's going on in my own life, my attitude to God, my reverence to Him, how I worship Him, those things matter as well.

I need to be holy before God. But of course, when Jesus comes, He takes away, for the need, of these visual aids. It's no longer required, because Jesus Himself, is now the ultimate visual aid.

He's the fulfillment, of all that is in the past. So, it's not like Jesus is now, throwing away the Old Testament, and contradicting what God had said, in the Old Testament. Rather, He had come, to fulfill it, and supersede it.

[17 : 56] And so, it's no longer needed, these laws, no longer relevant. That's why He can pronounce, all food clean. Just like there is no longer, any need to sacrifice animals, to be forgiven for your sins.

Why? Because Jesus, now is the ultimate sacrifice, who has already died for us, on the cross. Instead, what still matters, is the attitude of the heart, which is, whether it's the Old Testament, or the New, whether it's then or now, is still relevant, and important, for us.

In fact, now that Jesus has come, it is even more important, what happens in our hearts. Of course, sinful humans that we are, we're tempted, aren't we, to substitute the reality, for the shadow.

Right? It's more convenient, just to go through the motions. Right? I know it's not easy sometimes, but you know, just come to church every week, don't worry too much, about what's going on, in our lives, but as long as we're doing it, we're rather, that's much simpler, isn't it?

Much easier to take that off, than to have to really, search our hearts, and really check, what lies within. Now, we may not think of ourselves, as a traditional service, right?

[19 : 09] Because that's the, 745 AM service, that's a traditional service, but we have traditions too, don't we? Communal habits, that you know, any congregation will have.

Chicken and chips, for example, happening next week, that's a tradition, of this service, isn't it? It's a tradition, of most services, in HDD. But, being Anglican, we have our traditions, don't we, as well?

So, I know, we say prayers of confession, together, corporately, we recite the creed, from time to time, these are, traditional things, we do in the service. And, let me say, these prayers, and creeds, nothing wrong with them, okay?

They're well crafted, beautiful, well written, alright? But, it's possible, to say them, without having the right heart. Because, we just go through the motions, we've done it enough times, we've even memorized them, you know, instead of reflecting on them, which is the real purpose, so that we strengthen our faith with it, we humble ourselves, with those prayers.

And so, just think about it, are we really confessing, are we really repentant, if we simply pray the confession, without thinking about it? Not really, right?

[20 : 20] And then worse, if we then go out, and keep sinning, doing whatever we confess, blessed for, and not obey God's word afterwards. And so, it is easy, isn't it, to become like the Pharisees.

And then worse, when we then start judging other people, just because they don't follow our traditions, they don't do church the way we do. And of course, we do church the best way, don't we?

Friends, it is sobering, this passage, isn't it? It doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian, or you're not a Christian, every time you come to this, it will be challenging. And so, I think the first thing I want to suggest, and propose, is that, what Jesus wants us to do, is look at ourselves first, individually, but also as us as a church, and let's focus on our true motivations, and what's going on in our hearts.

Let's confront the evil, that lurks within, rather than worry, about the external party of others. And so, Jesus concludes in verse 20, what comes out of a person, is what defiles them, for it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils, come from inside, and defile a person. And here, Jesus puts the heart, and the mind together, because that's where, our thoughts, and motivations arise from, from within.

[21 : 53] But, you know, even though it's within, what Jesus says, is that, there is always a habit, for those thoughts, to come out, expressed as, sexual immorality, or theft, or murder, or whatever's on that list.

All of which, are evil. All of which, are sinful behavior, whether in word, or deed. And it is this act of, expressing, or acting out, of their evil thoughts, which Jesus describes, as defiling a person.

Now, I think in a sense, a person is already defiled, when they have such evil thoughts. You know, I don't need to, express them to be evil. But somehow, the expression of them outwards, compounds that sin, doesn't it?

Because now, it's, the harm is also, put on to other people, and the defilement, is evident for others to see. You know, friends, I often, do make light, of my, make light, of my wrongdoing.

You know, I don't know whether, you've heard others say this before, but you know, sometimes when, I've done something wrong, I might say, I'm having a bad day. It was out of character for me.

[23 : 08] I'm not myself today. I just wasn't myself. Now, when we say this of others, because they've done something wrong, that's a good thing, because we're trying to be charitable to them, and to the extent that, you know, we are God's work in progress, and you know, we sometimes slip.

It's okay to have that gracious stance. But when we apply it to ourselves repeatedly, you know, we must never fool ourselves to think that we're not capable of evil thoughts, and therefore be evil.

It's not just psychopaths or dictators in the world that are evil. If you're capable of getting so angry with someone, that you say you could strangle them, right?

Or you're so harsh in cursing someone, even though it's a moment of weakness, it shows, doesn't it, that we are capable of evil, that we have that evil within us.

And so, when it comes to applying this passage, the first thing to say is, let's be honest with ourselves. Ask ourselves that, without God's help, are we really good?

[24 : 17] Do we think we're so much better than others? And I'm pretty sure that if we search our hearts, we don't have to dig very far to find that we're still prone to evil, and sin, and transgressions.

Don't call it a slip of the tongue, for example, when really what it shows is the true state of our heart. Be honest. Be honest with yourself.

Because the aim, and God's aim, is not to condemn us by revealing the evil within, is not to cause us to despair. Rather, it is only when we're willing to be honest with ourselves, that we then know, who we need to turn to.

That there's only one person, Jesus, that can save us, from the evil within. By dying for us, firstly, but then also giving us his spirit, so that he can change us from within.

And like the Pharisees, it's so easy, isn't it, to deceive ourselves, by surrounding ourselves with the external piety of doing good. Drowning out, as it were, or covering up our sins, well, what we really need to do, is shine the light of God's word within.

[25 : 35] Just like it says in that psalm reading, in Psalm 19, from verse 11, only God's word, has that power to warn us, to discern our errors, to keep us from willful sin.

And the good news is that, when the word of God does do that, and we are repentant, you know, it's not to make us recoil in fear, and hide from God, but to come to him, to say, Lord, save me.

Then, verse 12, the psalmist says, that God will forgive us, our hidden faults, because of what Jesus has done, from on the cross for us.

And so, friends, if there is anyone here, who has not ever done that before, come to Jesus, and be honest with your sin, then please, let me invite you to do that. We cannot save ourselves.

No amount of good deeds externally, can change the heart within. It is only when Jesus, changes us, because we come to him for salvation, that that happens.

[26 : 33] So please, come to Jesus, just like the rest of us have. But once we're forgiven, then it's also important, isn't it, to remain humble. Yes, we're forgiven.

Yes, we're made righteous with Jesus. But don't let it go to our head, so that we think we're now so good, we can't fall from temptation. Yes, praise God, that by his spirit, we're being changed, to become more and more like Jesus.

That there's less and less times, where we do evil. That we're more consistent, in our godliness. But you know, to be like Jesus, is also to be humble. Not self-righteous, not looking down on others, like the Pharisees.

So, let's just keep checking our motives, and our hearts. And where there's even the smallest hint of error, let's go to God straight away, let's repent, let's ask him to change us.

Because, the biggest risks, actually, when we grow in our faith, the biggest temptation, actually, is sin. The actual temptation, is the sin of pride, and self-righteousness.

[27 : 39] That is actually, the Achilles heel, that we need to guard against constantly. Because, the more we grow closer, and closer to God, the more we know about God's word, the more we mature in Christ, the more tempted, we will think, that we deserve it.

That we've arrived. That we are godly, because we put all this hard work in. And that, my friend, the sin of pride, and self-righteousness, is the sin of the Pharisees.

That's where they got to. Because, over time, they had practiced so much of the human traditions, that they thought, that they were right before God. Instead, what we need to do, is remember, that it's only by God's grace alone, that we are saved.

Cleanse, not by what we've done, but by the blood of Jesus. So, let me pause now, and give you a chance to reflect, on what may be lurking in your hearts, and then let me pray.

Father, help us to see ourselves, as you see us. Someone who searches the heart, and exposes all our hidden faults, and errors. Thank you for your son, Jesus.

[28 : 55] That he has come, to save us, from all that is within. or that is wrong and evil within. Teach us to be humble, so that we can continue, to look to Jesus, for our salvation, our sanctification, and to take joy, that by his spirit, you are changing us, to be more and more like him.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.