

Religion and Faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 March 2016

Preacher: Devin Toh

- [0 : 0 0] All right, let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we open your word today, help us to hear and understand clearly what you might show us. And Lord, as we hear your word today, we pray that you would transform us right where we're sitting right now.
- In your name, amen. So, when I was growing up, I used to love playing golf. And having grown up watching Tiger Woods, I wanted to be the next Tiger Woods.
- I wanted to be like him in every way. And actually, there was actually a whole raft of young golfers and old who wanted to be just like him, who wanted to be just like Tiger Woods. But there was only one problem to that.
- We all of us lack the talent. Anyway, we used to have this term to describe certain golfers, and that was all gear, no idea.
- All gear, no idea. These are people that would have the best golf gear, but would have absolutely no idea how to play the game. They would buy all the latest and greatest golf equipment, the best golf bags, the best golf clubs, the best golf balls.
- [1 : 1 1] Even they would look the best. They'd have the best golf clothes. They would look like professional golfers. But actually, these people had absolutely no idea how to play golf, and they were terrible.
- And that is similar to what we're going to see in our passage today. We're going to see people who, from the outside, looked like they had it all together, but in reality, that couldn't be further from the truth.
- How they represented themselves on the outside was very different to what was in the inside. And as we look at today's text, Jesus is going to show us that although on the outside, religion may look very neat, it cannot make us right with God.
- And in particular, we're going to see three things today. We're going to see the hypocrisy of the religious, the problem of the heart, and the solution of faith.
- So firstly, let's look at the hypocrisy of the religious. We saw last week that Jesus had performed some incredible miracles, which shows that he was the true king.
- [2 : 1 2] He fed 5,000 people. He walked on water. And then today, we see Jesus healing the sick in the region of Gennesaret. And at this stage, Jesus' reputation is growing.
- And the scribes and the Pharisees, they presumably catch wind of this. Now, these scribes and Pharisees were people whose very job it was to study the law, to teach and interpret the law.
- So we're dealing here with some very highly respected people of the community because of their knowledge and their dedication to keeping the law. These are supposedly the good guys, the religious guys.
- So in verse 1, these scribes and Pharisees, they come all the way from Jerusalem to Gennesaret to see what Jesus was doing. And this is actually a very long way.
- It's about 140 kilometers, 143 kilometers in distance, you know, according to Google Maps. And this would probably take about approximately 30 hours to walk nonstop.

[3 : 10] Okay, so they've come all this way. And guess what they want to know about Jesus? Do they want to know if he's really the Messiah, the promised king? Have they come to witness, you know, all the amazing things that he's done so far?

No, they want to see if he's washed his hands. Already we see that these religious people are kind of missing the point, aren't they? And they have a go at Jesus for this very thing.

In verse 2, the Pharisees ask Jesus, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat. See, for these Pharisees, this was not a simple question of soap and water for hygiene purposes, but this was actually a matter of being clean before God, being acceptable to God through clean hands.

That's why they care so much. You'll notice that they call it the tradition of the elders. So Jesus shoots right back at them in verse 3. Jesus replied, So they have it back to front, don't they?

This requirement to wash your hands wasn't a command of God from the Old Testament. It was something that was clearly made up by man. Clearly the Pharisees have their priorities mixed up here.

[4 : 27] They're more concerned with keeping their human traditions than really obeying the word of God. Jesus then uses an illustration for how they break God's commands to keep their tradition.

And you'll see that verse 4 starts with the word for, or because. Let's look on from verse 4. For God said, Honour your father and mother, and whoever curses their father or mother is to be put to death.

But you say, if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is devoted to God, they are not to honour their father or mother with it. So in other words, if you decide to give some money to God, but then your parents actually need financial support, well, bad luck, mum and dad.

The Pharisees' tradition said you cannot help your parents because you've already devoted that money to God. So the point is that God's command to honour your parents was overridden by their religious tradition.

And Jesus says in verse 6, thus you nullify or break the word of God for the sake of your tradition. So Jesus calls it exactly what it is, hypocrisy.

[5 : 36] They claim to be honouring God with their traditions, but they're actually rebelling and they're breaking God's word and they're forcing people to do the same. So verse 7, Jesus says, You hypocrites!

Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, saying, These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules.

And this is the hypocrisy, that from the outside they seem to be worshipping God and doing all this ceremonial stuff, like washing their hands. But in the inside, their hearts were far from God.

You see, the heart of the problem is the human heart. They love their traditions more than God's word. And they're parents, I guess. I mean, the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbour.

But here, the Pharisees love their traditions. They love their traditions more. And so, whether they realised it or not, their hearts had drifted far from God. And this is the difficult thing.

[6 : 49] The hypocrisy of the religious is very hard to diagnose. And it's especially very hard to diagnose in our own lives. See, many of us are involved in great things.

We go to church, we serve in different ministries, we do many things for the community around us. And these are all fantastic. But unfortunately, these things can sometimes mask the true condition of our hearts.

And as Jesus said, the heart matters. But there's a problem which brings us to point to the problem of the heart. And what we will see is that the problem of the heart is not just the religious person's problem, but this is everyone's problem.

Verses 10 to 11. Jesus called the crowd to him and said, listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.

Here, Jesus calls the crowds to him and speaks to them in a parable. And Jesus asked the crowds in verse 10 to hear and understand. You'll remember from a few weeks ago that when Jesus calls us to hear and understand, he means that there's actually an underlying truth for us to understand and to apply in our own lives.

[8 : 05] And this truth is that being right and acceptable to God is an issue of the heart, not an issue of washing. And not surprisingly, this doesn't go down well.

The Pharisees are not happy here. Jesus has exposed them, the people that were supposedly the good religious guys, the most morally upstanding individuals in society. Look at verses 12 to 14.

Then the disciples came to him and asked, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this? He replied, Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.

Leave them. They are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. So the Pharisees aren't happy at all. And the one thing that you'll notice about these religious people is that they don't seek understanding.

They are not willing to listen to Jesus and acknowledge the truth of what he was actually saying. Instead, they take offense at the truth and they persist with their religious practices. But Jesus is not too concerned that they don't like him.

[9 : 11] He calls them blind guides in verse 14. And the crazy thing is that even though these are the Jews, these are God's chosen people on the outside, Jesus says that they are not God's people on the inside.

Jesus says that my father didn't even plant them in verse 13. And because of their hard hearts, they are not really God's people. Instead, they're going to be rejected by God.

So it's obvious that the Pharisees don't get it. But what's really interesting is that the disciples don't get it either. They asked for an explanation. They had walked with Jesus. They'd seen his teachings.

They'd seen his life. They'd seen all of his miracles. Yet they still didn't understand and apply what Jesus was saying. So Jesus explains to them in verses 17 to 20. Don't you see that whatever answers the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?

But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

[10 : 23] These are what defile a person. But eating with unwashed hands does not defile them. What really makes us unclean and defiled?

What really makes us unacceptable to God is not unclean hands, but it's an unclean and sinful heart. All of our evil thoughts, all of the murder, adultery, and the brokenness that we see in this world today can be traced back to the condition of the human heart.

Take the Arab and Israeli conflict over the Holy Land of Jerusalem. On the one hand, the Jews believe that God will rebuild his temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand, the Muslims believe that Muhammad ascended into heaven at Mount Moriah in Jerusalem.

So they both think that Jerusalem is their Holy Land. And the roots of this conflict can be traced back to the late 19th century. There was a full-scale war in 1948 and tensions continue to this day.

So what's the real issue here? Is the real problem about who's right, about whose land it really is? And will the conflict be resolved by actually finding out the answer to that question?

[11 : 33] Of course not. Because the problem has never been about geography. But the real problem is the problem of the heart. And this conflict will continue because all human hearts are unclean.

And this includes all of us too. no exceptions. All of us have hearts which are by nature against God. And this is the origin of all our evil thoughts and our sinful desires too.

Let me ask you guys a question. Would any of you be comfortable if we could look inside your head and read all of your thoughts for just one day? Who would be comfortable with that? Every thought that you had for one day.

I know if someone could read all my thoughts for one day, I'd run away, I'd never come back and I'd avoid them for the rest of my life. See, no matter who we are, we know deep down, don't we, that there really is something wrong with the state of our hearts.

And our thoughts are so reflective of this truth. Jesus is making it clear here that the heart of the problem is the human heart which is defiled and sinful.

[12 : 43] And this is really what makes us unacceptable to God. So where to from here? We've seen the hypocrisy of the religious and how no one is immune from the problem of the heart.

So what is the solution? What is the fix to our predicament? Well, we then see Jesus leave the region of Gennesaret and travel further north to Tyre and Sidon.

And actually, he's now in Gentile territory. He's in non-Jewish territory. And as he gets there, he comes, he sees a woman come crying out to him. And she's actually a Gentile woman from that region.

And as a Gentile or non-Jew, she is the definition of an unclean person according to the Jews. See, Gentiles were not set apart as God's people. So she is not acceptable to God by Jewish standards.

She is by birth unclean and unworthy to be associated with God. We see this type of sentiment expressed in John chapter 18 where Jewish leaders wouldn't even enter the house of a Roman governor because being with a non-Jew would make them ceremonially unclean before the Passover.

[13 : 53] But notice here that this woman is also described as a Canaanite in verse 22. Now this word Canaanite is actually very interesting. It's the only word, it's the only time the word Canaanite is used in the whole New Testament.

You might remember that the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan back in the Old Testament and God actually used Israel to judge the Canaanites and ever since then the Canaanites were enemies of Israel.

So this woman is really unacceptable to God. Not only is she a Gentile but she is an enemy of Israel. But look at how she addresses Jesus in verse 22.

A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out Lord, Son of David have mercy on me. My daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly.

Alright, so notice two things here. Firstly, she calls Jesus the Son of David which means Christ. She's actually calling Jesus the Messiah here. God's anointed king promised back in the Old Testament.

[15 : 00] The Pharisees, you know, these experts in the law who no doubt heard of Jesus' miracles, they don't recognize Jesus as the king. But this Canaanite woman who no doubt heard of Jesus' miracles as well does recognize Jesus as the king, the promised saviour of God's people.

Second, we see that she cries out for mercy where the Pharisees approached Jesus from a position of authority over him. This woman approaches Jesus from a position of humility under him.

This woman knows that she is not acceptable before God and so begs him for mercy. So when Jesus hears this, he must know that she does have faith, doesn't she?

She has faith in who he really is. But Jesus' reaction seems odd in response. Have a look at verses 23 to 26. Jesus didn't answer her a word.

So his disciples came to him and urged him, send her away for she keeps crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman came and knelt before him.

[16 : 08] Lord, help me, she cried. He replied, it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. Notice Jesus' three reactions.

Firstly, he ignores her. Then he says that he's come only to the lost sheep of Israel, not the Gentiles. And thirdly, he basically just calls her a dog. Now, dog was a common derogatory term that the Jews used to refer to Gentiles at that time.

It was a way of communicating that these Gentiles, they were unclean and unacceptable. And you know, some commentators, they try and make Jesus sound a little less harsh here by saying, actually, the word he says is little dog.

So, you know, it's kind of cute, it's kind of adorable that he calls a little dog. But I don't buy that. I think that's a little bit of a weak excuse. Because even if I called you a little dog, that doesn't really soften the blow, does it?

Big dog or a little dog, you're still a dog. So, why would Jesus do this? Well, two reasons, I think. Firstly, Jesus says that his mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel at that time.

[17 : 15] We know by the end of the gospel that Jesus sends us to make disciples of all nations. But at that moment, he came first to the Jews, God's privileged people. So, her time has not yet come.

And yet, we see Jesus travel north to this region of Tyre and Sidon, which shows that he actually did come to save the Gentiles, not just the Jews. In fact, in the next scene, we see Jesus healing and feeding the Gentiles in verses 29 to 39.

So, the second reason he seems to resist her plea is to actually highlight her faith. Think about it. If he heals her, if he heals her daughter after she calls him the son of David, sure, that would be faith.

But we wouldn't see just how much faith she had compared to the Pharisees. So, I wonder here if Jesus is using a common but harsh answer in a way to really push her to show her how great her faith really is.

And we see that in her response, don't we? It's amazing. Because if someone calls you a dog, you probably should leave. You probably get a sense that you're not going to get what you asked for. You're not going to receive anything.

[18 : 24] But look at her reply in verses 27 and 28. Yes, Lord, she said, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

Then Jesus said to a woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed at that moment. Amazingly, this woman continues with the metaphor.

She actually accepts the title of dog. And in doing so, she acknowledges the fact that she's unclean. She doesn't take offense or walk away like the Pharisees did.

No, this woman's faith and humility is so great that she's hoping that in Jesus' mercy, she might even be able to just get a few little crumbs off him. Now, this is completely different to the religious Pharisees, isn't it?

They've come all the way from Jerusalem to conclude that Jesus is unclean. But in contrast, this woman comes from a position of weakness. Acknowledging that she herself is unclean.

[19 : 26] Doesn't this just show the amount of faith and trust that she has in Jesus? She has faith not only in who he is as the Messiah, but she also has faith in Jesus' ability to heal her daughter.

And Jesus knows this. He exclaims that she has great faith and grants her request. And right on cue, her daughter was healed instantly. By granting her request, Jesus shows that he accepts this unclean woman as clean.

In his eyes, she is the one who is truly clean because of her humble heart and her great faith. And so Matthew's giving us this great contrast here between the Pharisees and this woman to show us that faith and not religion is what makes us acceptable to God.

So you'll see at the back of your handouts and up on the slide this great contrast between the Pharisees and this woman. Where the Pharisees look down on Jesus in judgment and say, wash your hands, the woman looks up to Jesus in humility and says, have mercy.

Where the Pharisees are offended by Jesus and reject the truth, the woman is not offended by Jesus and accepts the truth. Where the Pharisees ignore who Jesus is, the woman has great faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the King.

[20 : 52] And where these Pharisees are from Israel by birth yet are rejected by God, the woman is not from Israel by birth yet is accepted by God.

So do you see the point that Matthew's making here? Faith and not religion is what makes us acceptable to God. All right, so let me ask you, are you acceptable in God's eyes?

Do you truly have faith? Or are you trying to rely on religion or doing good things to make you right with God? See, this is what we try and do. We try and live good lives.

We try and be moral, upstanding citizens. But none of these things actually deal with the true problem of the heart. But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus has the power to deal with our heart problem.

Just like he could heal the woman's daughter, he is the one who can truly heal the condition of our hearts. And on that cross, Jesus took all of our defilement, all of our uncleanness, so that we could be made right with him.

[21 : 59] And in return, Jesus gives us his righteousness so that now we are right and acceptable in God's eyes. And this cannot be earned by doing good things, but it can only be received through faith alone.

Faith in humbly admitting our own defilement and trusting in Jesus' ability to clean us. So have you put your faith in Jesus to be acceptable to God? And for those of you who have placed your trust in Jesus, we too must be careful to not fall into the trap of the Pharisees.

I don't know if you find this, but we can often turn good things into rituals. This could be, you know, coming to church every Sunday, getting baptized, taking communion. Don't get me wrong, these are all good things, but these are not what make us acceptable to God.

Because as Jesus said, the real problem is not the external, but the real problem is the heart. Some of you might know that I've transitioned out of full-time work and began as a ministry apprentice at this church.

And to me, you know, this seemed like a big step and people were really encouraging for me to pursue it. And I remember thinking to myself, wow, I've really made it, haven't I?

[23 : 15] I'm a pretty good Christian for doing something like this. I'm going to church more, I'm studying the Bible more, I'm praying with people more, I'm even studying at a Bible college.

And in my mind, I thought I was somehow a really good person for doing all of that. But looking back, I had totally missed the point.

Whilst these are all good things, I need to remind myself that none of these things make me more acceptable to God. It's so easy for me to just point to all these Christian things I'm doing and miss the real problem of the heart.

From the outside, these things might appear to be honouring to God, but on the inside, my heart could still be far from Him. Rather, as we heard in our first reading, we need to be those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at God's word.

And what's more, all of this should actually cause us to respond in gratitude for what Jesus has done for us. We who were once far off, we who were once dogs, have now been made clean and brought into a relationship with God.

[24 : 27] Not because of anything that we have done, but solely out of His mercy and grace. So with thankful hearts, let's keep putting our trust in Jesus, not in religious activities, but in a person, the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Father, we thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is truly the Messiah, our King.

Help us not to rely on religion, but to place our trust in you. We are sorry for our own hypocrisy and we ask that you would heal us by your power. We thank you that we who were once unclean and defiled are now made clean and acceptable in your sight.

What a privilege that is. In your Son's name. Amen. Amen.