

Sermon 8-26-18
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W. Hempstead, NY
Based on the 7th chapter of Mark's Gospel

Close But Far

We saw in today's gospel lesson that a controversy erupted when some Pharisees noticed some of Jesus' disciples eating with ceremonially unwashed hands, and rabbi Jesus did nothing about it. By openly criticizing Jesus this way, they were seeking to bring Him under their authority. If Jesus had acknowledged the validity of their criticism and then had exhorted His disciples to follow the ritual washings, He would have been acknowledging their authority.

But Jesus didn't cave to their criticism. Instead, He turned the tables and openly criticized them, seeking to bring them under His authority. Indeed, being that He is the Son of God, this was a merciful thing to do to them.

Jesus based His criticism of the Pharisees on a prophecy given 600 years earlier in the book of Isaiah. It's quoted this way to us in Mark 7:6-7, "6 He [Jesus] replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."' It sounds a little different directly from Isaiah 29:13, "13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." However, it's the same thing, just said a little differently.

By quoting this verse Jesus pinpointed two separate but related problems of the human heart. Both proceed directly out of the problem we have with the likeness of God. For in the likeness of God we sinfully claim the right to sit on God's high throne and define good and evil for ourselves, even what is spiritual and unspiritual. Therefore, when Jesus said we want to draw near to God while keeping our hearts far from Him, He meant that we want to approach God either out of custom or out of need, yet absolutely preserve our claim to sit on God's high throne and define good and evil for ourselves.

Do you see the impossibility of this? Yahweh can only be approached with the same righteousness He has. How, then, can those who sinfully insist on sitting in God's high throne successfully approach Him? Yet, we deceive ourselves into thinking that by engaging in certain religious behaviors we can approach God – all the while refusing to relinquish the right to define good and evil for ourselves.

This makes for some interesting self-deception, as in the man who had been caught in adultery yet wanted to remain an honored officer of the church. Or the self-deception can be more acceptable as in the form of people who gossip about others. So that's the first problem Jesus identified – desiring to draw near to God, while stubbornly resisting God's righteousness and His Spirit.

The second problem concerns the relationship between the religious teachings of human beings and the teaching of God. When human teaching and God's teaching

found in Scripture agree, there's no problem. But when there is disagreement, God's teaching must prevail. If not, there's a severe problem.

Indeed, in our gospel lesson Jesus brought up several severe conflicts in His time. For instance, Yahweh commands that we honor our mother and father even by supporting them financially in old age. But in their human tradition the Pharisees and lawyers had instituted a rule whereby those who dedicated their money to the temple would be exempt from supporting their aged parents. This clearly conflicts with God's righteous command to honor father and mother.

There was also a severe conflict with the washing of hands and other ritual washings. But it was one not so easily identified. Jesus masterfully brought it to everyone's attention with His criticism in Mark 7:14-15, "14... 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 Nothing outside a man can make him "unclean" by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him "unclean."'"

This almost sounds wacky to us who understand that human beings can get deathly ill by ingesting unclean stuff. But this is not at all what Jesus was talking about. To understand what He meant, we have to substitute the word righteous for the word clean. And we have to substitute the word unrighteous for the word unclean. When we make these substitutions it becomes clear that nothing going into the stomach can make us either righteous or unrighteous before God.

Now, this was a revolutionary teaching. For, under the Law of Moses a Jewish person could become unrighteous before God by eating various foods, such as pork and shellfish. Under the Law of Moses, it was important to eat only righteous food prepared in a righteous way. This is what the kosher law is about to this day.

And taking that concept a step further, the Pharisees and lawyers had developed a teaching tradition about ritually cleansing hands before eating and the ritual cleansing of eating utensils. Just understand that their teaching had nothing to do with germs. Rather it was about what makes us righteous or unrighteous before God. The Pharisees taught that ritual washing makes people righteous before God. Failure to wash makes people unrighteous.

Now, for people who want to draw near to God while still preserving their desire to do their own thing, obedience to such ritual laws as washing is just what the doctor ordered. For, it's easy to ritually wash your hands, your plates and other utensils. And if doing so is guaranteed to gain you righteousness with God, that's perfect! For then, we can commend ourselves to God, and we don't have to examine ourselves for any unrighteous behavior the Law might command us to change. We can successfully deceive ourselves into thinking we're near to God through ritual washing while our hearts remain quite far from His righteousness.

Jesus made it very clear that this just wouldn't do. Therefore, He unequivocally declared that nothing that goes into the stomach can make us either righteous or unrighteous before God. (And this teaching is stunning in itself, because it abrogates all the food laws of the Law of Moses.) Instead Jesus identified the human heart and spirit as the source of righteousness or unrighteousness. He said in Mark 7:20-23, "20... 'What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' 21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean."'" Do you get it? All these evils

from within make us unrighteous before God. They are the things that have to be dealt with if we are to be righteous before God.

Now, we know that Jesus Himself came precisely to deal with our unrighteousness and our self-deception. He came to destroy the likeness of God, the wicked rebellion in our hearts and restore us to the perfect goodness of the Image of God. Therefore, by criticizing the Pharisees, Jesus was pointing them away from trusting in their religious behavior as the source of their righteousness. Instead, He was pointing at Himself as the true source of their righteousness – their only source of righteousness. But they could not receive that.

And this is the primary point. What is the source of our righteousness before God? Originally it was the image of God in which Yahweh created Adam and Eve. But when Adam and Eve decided instead to become like God deciding good and evil for themselves, they corrupted the image of God in themselves and gained a sinful nature. This they passed on to us in the form of original sin. Therefore, by nature we are sinful and unclean. We have no intrinsic righteousness before God.

The only solution is if Yahweh Himself would restore to us the totally righteous nature He originally gave us created in the image of God. And this He graciously has done for us in Jesus Christ to His own great praise and glory. This is the glorious gospel of God.

The good news is that you and I can be restored to the full righteousness of the Image of God – only not in this life. That must await our death or the Lord's coming. Nevertheless, restoration to the image of God is the great and wonderful hope of every believer.

In the meantime, however, we exist in this sinful situation where we must continue to decide good and evil. Therefore, the only way for any human being to have righteousness before God is solely by the gracious wonderful gift of God Himself, and not by anything of our own doing. And the good news is that Jesus is the very gift of God's righteousness for every person. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." And again in Romans 3:22-24, "22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace...." Jesus is our righteousness. He is mine. He is yours. He is our righteousness by faith in God's Word to us.

Therefore, only Jesus can deal with all the evil that comes out of our hearts voluntarily and involuntarily. Only He can cleanse it. Only His Spirit can set us on the road to righteousness in this life and bring us to the righteousness that is to come. There is nothing else in this life that can bring us to this wonderful grace. There is no ritual eating, no ritual words or praying, no ritual cleansing – only the grace of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, Jesus is the solution to the two problems. In Him we can not only draw near to God, in Jesus our hearts are graciously made close to the living God, even though we still live under the effects of original sin. This is nothing short of miraculous.

Jesus is also the solution to the second problem in this way. All the teaching of the church must revolve around Him. It must revolve around God's Word. So long as

we deny ourselves any right to sit on God's throne deciding for ourselves what is spiritual and what is not, then there won't be any conflict between what we teach and God's Holy Word. For the true church teaches God's Word.

We conclude by recognizing three important things. First, God has ordained things in His church so that we are not taught by the holy angels, but by fellow citizens of the kingdom. The church is lead by human beings. We're taught the basics by human beings. We're matured in the faith by human beings. We're taught how to worship by human beings. We're taught how to endure hardship and blossom in faith, hope and love by human beings. We're taught how to commit ourselves to Jesus by human beings. We're taught how to operate in good works and the gracious gifts of Lord Holy Spirit by human beings.

Second, tradition is very important to human beings. Like it or not we all operate in tradition. God made us that way. Tradition gives us identity as the people of God. It gives us identity as a particular congregation in a particular locale. The teaching of the church is built on tradition. Therefore, it's important that we continuously examine our traditions to make sure we do not do what the Pharisees did – enshrine something contrary to the Word of God in our practice and teaching.

It doesn't matter if a tradition was developed centuries ago or just several months ago. It doesn't matter if we've just adopted some new thing. Tomorrow it will become tradition. It doesn't matter if we've just adopted some new song that we like. Tomorrow it will become a tradition to sing it. Therefore, all tradition, new or old, must be subject to the Word of God. All teaching and tradition must conform to the Word of God. Everything must point us to our Lord Jesus Christ and to His righteousness alone. Everything must be tested.

And this brings us to the third thing: worship. For centuries now there has been controversy over whose worship traditions are more spiritual. And the criticism Jesus leveled at the Pharisees has been used in this argument.

But as we've seen, so long as human teaching agrees with the Word of God, it is sound. Therefore, if a pattern of human worship agrees with the Word of God it is sound. The age of the pattern makes no difference. The length makes no difference. The human culture in which it arose makes no difference. If a worship pattern fully agrees with the Word of God, it is sound.

Therefore, assuming that a worship pattern is sound, any dispute of the spiritual in worship comes back to the first problem Jesus identified. It's super easy for human beings conceived in original sin to be physically present in a worship service even though our hearts are far from God. For, again, we secretly want to sit on God's big throne justifying our own lifestyle and actions as righteous, rather than confessing our sin and letting our gracious Savior justify our lives by His righteousness alone. We're easily more concerned about Sunday dinner or a golf game than the luscious feast of God's Word and Sacrament in front of us.

Remember? Last week we showed the connection between the spiritual and words. The spiritual is words. But the real spiritual is God's Word. Therefore, when Lord Holy Spirit develops three-tiered faith in us so that we can confess God's Word back to Him and personally own it by faith, then the real spiritual happens in our lives and in Christ's church.

So, if we want Trinity to be recognized as a spiritually alive place, then we need to follow our Lord's teaching on the matter. We all live and breathe the likeness of God whether we like it or not. Therefore, let us come to service prepared to confess this sin and jump off God's big throne down to earth where our Savior will graciously meet us to forgive sin, justify our lives and feed us with true heavenly food. Through faith in God's Word, let us come expecting yet another foretaste of the restored Image of God – that righteousness before God that the saints and holy angels possess. By faith let us go forth from this house expecting Lord Holy Spirit to be on our side in all the temptations, wears and tears of this life. Indeed, come Holy Spirit and do your work in us so that we may become the righteousness of Christ. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.