

Sunday 27 September 2020
It's what's inside that counts

Milford Baptist
Matthew 15:1-20

It was the first time I had ever had to buy a car on my own.
My Dad, or experienced older men,
had always advised me before.

Then I saw it in the sales yard.
It looked really great – metallic silver, tinted windows.
A really good-looking car

I didn't know that you didn't pay the full window price:
(Especially if you were paying cash as I was.)
And I had seen someone else looking closely,
So I got in quick,
paid the full price,
and drove off proudly with my flash looking vehicle.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long to discover that this beautiful car
used so much petrol it nearly bankrupted me,
AND it seemed it used just about as much oil as petrol.

Within six months I was trying to sell it.

Well - I did lose 25% of what I had paid six months earlier
But I was just glad the one person who answered my add,
actually came and looked at the car,
and obviously wanted a car that looked good.
and I managed to be rid of it.

I had learned a very valuable lesson.
It's not what something looks like on the outside that matters,
It's what drives it on the inside that counts.

You know – I think that pretty much sums up
what Jesus was teaching in our reading this morning.

The religion of the Pharisees and scribes was all about appearances.
It was all about obeying all the traditions,
Doing the right thing.

And Jesus says, it's not about externals,
It's about what is in the heart.

It's not about ritual and legalism,
It's about relationships of love with God and others.

The Pharisees really tried to make the law of God
practical in every area of living.
Never numbering more than five or six thousand in total
they did their best to live morally and involve God
in every detail of their lives,
be it how and what they ate,
whom they married, or how they dressed.

In their day, the Pharisees were much admired by the common people.
Their zeal for traditional Jewish values,
and their strict lifestyle,
placed them on a pedestal of respect.

When Jesus came and ministered he frequently ran into the Pharisees
-- in the temple, at funerals, at weddings, in synagogues.

The New Testament tells us that the Pharisees,
the best Bible students of their generation,
the best behaved,
became the constant opponents of Jesus Christ and,
in the end, actually plotted Jesus' death.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they had got to the stage
where traditionalism controlled their life.

Someone has said, and I quite like this,

Traditionalism is the living religion of the dead
or the dead religion of the living.

Tradition imagines that nothing worthwhile
will ever again be done for the first time
because everything worth doing has already been done.

Therefore, traditionalism repeats what it imagined always was
and what it imagines always will be.

The problem with tradition for tradition's sake
is it is a terminal case of spiritual heart disease.

Just to show how much a hold this traditionalism had,
Let's look at the tradition of 'clean' and 'unclean'
which is the reason the Pharisees
got upset with Jesus and his disciples.

This has nothing to do with physical cleanness.
It is entirely a ceremonial matter.

For a person to be clean meant
that they could approach and worship God.
To be unclean meant approach and worship was impossible.

This uncleanness was contracted by contact
with certain persons or things.

For instance, a woman was unclean if she was bleeding,
even if that came from her normal monthly period;

She was unclean for a stated time after she had had a child;
every dead body was unclean,
and to touch it was to become unclean;
every Gentile was unclean.

And, just like Covid, this uncleanness was infectious.

For instance, if a mouse touched a pottery jug,
that jug was unclean and unless
it was ritually washed and cleansed,
everything put into it was unclean.

The consequence was that anyone who touched that jug,
or drank from it became unclean;
and in turn anyone who touched the person
who had so become unclean also became unclean.

Now – remember - to the orthodox Jew
all this ritual ceremony was religion;
this is what, they believed, God demanded.

To do these things was to please God, and to be a good person.
In fact, this ritual washing was regarded as just as important
and just as binding as the Ten Commandments themselves.

One writer outlines how elaborate this hand washing was.
Water jars were kept ready to be used before a meal.
The minimum amount of water to be used
was enough to fill one and a half egg-shells.

The water was first poured on both hands,
held with the fingers pointed upwards,
and must run down the hand to the wrist.
It must drop off from the wrist, for the water was now itself unclean,

The process was repeated with the hands
held in the opposite direction, with the fingers pointing down;
and then finally each hand was cleansed
by being rubbed with the fist of the other.

A really strict Jew would do all this,
not only before a meal, but also between each of the courses.

The question of the Jewish orthodox leaders
who had come all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee
to interview Jesus is:

"Why do your disciples not observe the laws of washing
which our tradition lays down?"

They are genuinely bewildered;
and in a very short time they are going
to be genuinely outraged and shocked;
for the basic importance of this passage
is that it is much more than a clash between Jesus and the Pharisees;
it is something far more-
-it is the collision of two views of religion and two views
of the demands of God.

When Jesus goes on to talk about the laws relating to
what you should and should not eat,
it has been said that for a Jew
this was the most startling thing Jesus ever said.

For in this saying he does not only condemn Pharisaic ritual
and ceremonial religion;
he actually wipes out large sections
of the book of Leviticus.

This is not a contradiction of the tradition of the elders alone;
this is a contradiction of scripture itself.
This saying of Jesus cancels all the food laws of the Old Testament.

Once and for all Jesus lays it down that what matters
is not how faithful your ritual observance is,
but the state of a person's heart.

No wonder the Scribes and Pharisees were shocked.
Jesus was rejecting the very basis of their religious practice.
This statement was not simply alarming; it was revolutionary.

If Jesus was right, their whole theory of religion was wrong.
They identified religion and pleasing God
with the observing of rules and regulations
which had to do with cleanness and with uncleanness,
with what a person ate and with how they washed their hands
before they ate it;

Jesus identified religion with what is on the inside,
In the heart of a person.
And he said bluntly
that these Pharisaic and Scribal regulations
had nothing to do with religion.

He got even more controversial and revolutionary when
He said that the Pharisees were blind guides
who had no idea of the way to God,
and that, if people followed them,
all they could expect was to stray off the road
and to fall into the ditch. And Jesus was profoundly right.

Now we are not at all like the Pharisees are we?
Let us be honest and ask ourselves some questions
That may answer that question for us.

Are you increasing in pride or humility?
Paul, who was a Pharisee,
Started off a bit arrogant about his knowledge of Jesus
but went, as the years passed to the place where he said: "
"I am the least of the apostles" and then later
"I am the least of the saints"
And finally in A.D. 65, he wrote: "I am the chief of sinners".
As the years pass, do you know more or less?
Are you more often right than wrong?
Is your self-righteousness ever like the Pharisees?

Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrits.
I think, as a Christian, I am a hypocrite.

I know that I do not always practice what I preach.
How you and I need to constantly evaluate how others see us.
Christians saying one thing and doing another
is so often the reason given by non-Christians
for rejecting faith?
And when I hear their stories,
I can totally understand their position.

Are you inclined to see what's wrong with everything?
Do you have a critical spirit?
Jesus healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisees said, "No!"
He ate with a harlot. The Pharisees said, "No!"
He ate with unwashed hands. "No!"
He cast a demon out. "No!" the Pharisees chorused.
There are certainly some Christians who just can't be pleased
Who find something wrong with everything.
Let's make sure that is not me or you.

Do you crave recognition?
The Pharisees loved to grab the best seats in the synagogue
or at a table feast.
They sewed bells on their robes
so you'd hear them coming,
even provided a trumpet fanfare before they made an offering.

I know some Christian who quite like others
to know how much they do -
how faithful they are,
how spiritual they are.
Please God – help that not be me or you.

Even if it is unconscious, do you judge others?
Do you believe you are closer to God than others?
Isn't it true we judge others for their flaws,
ourselves by our virtues,
and always get such nice comparisons?

Sometimes I have even thought that God
is lucky to have me on his side!

It is even possible to get to the point when we
think God's opinions are the same as ours.

The Pharisees didn't like emotional displays.

There was the woman who washed and dried Jesus feet.

The crowds who were enthusiastic
when Jesus entered Jerusalem.

The Pharisees were scornful.

Am I critical when others worship with emotion.

Beware the Pharisee.

Do you glory in the past?

The Pharisees stood before Jesus and haughtily remarked,
"We have Abraham as our Father" (Matthew 3:9).

A man and movement of God 1,000 years earlier
thrilled them more than what God was doing under their noses.

It is possible to glory in the music of the past,

Or the preachers of the past,

Do you bring division or unity?

The Pharisees wouldn't join Jesus

when he ate with those they disapproved of ;
and they waved others away.

So we can use our influence to tear everything apart that's not perfect,
not our taste, not up to our standards, not ... not ... not...!

Yet criticism is the easiest part of any job!

But patience, mercy, working together, mission –
- this is the real work.

It's, "What have you built?"

Not, "What have you criticized?"

Will you and I take correction?

The Pharisees wouldn't.

When Jesus corrected them they were "offended" (Matthew 15:1-2).

They had arrogant, independent spirits.

Me? Will I take correction in how I relate to others?

Are you merciful or sticklers for the law?

We thought about that last week

when Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery.

Will our church welcome those struggling with life?

Those who are still failing, falling, sinning?

Are we merciful as Jesus was?

Or do people like that stay away from church?

Sadly – often they do

Yes – I find some of the Pharisee in my own character.

May Jesus help me recognise those characteristics,

And, with his help, change them.

You know, if we ever live and act as if religion

consists in external regulations and observances

we need to recognise that we are taking the easy way.

It is very much easier to abstain from certain foods

and to wash the hands in a certain way

than it is to love the unlovely and the unlovable,

and to help the needy at the cost of one's own time and money

and comfort and pleasure.

But Jesus said that we need a new heart.

One renewed by the presence of His Spirit within.

He still answers those who echo David's prayer,

"Create in me a pure heart, O God,

and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

In the record of this teaching in mark's gospel,

Jesus adds these words when he is explaining to his disciples

about the heart.

For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, arrogance and foolishness. All these evils come from within and make you unacceptable to God "— Mark 7:21-23

That is the heart that needs renewal.

Someone has said:

“The heart of the matter really is the heart of the matter
because the heart is, finally, the soul's mirror.

When the heart is right with God, then the life is right with God.”

We can have a serious heart problem characterised as above,
or we can have a renewed heart characterized
by the fruit of the Spirit,
"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23),

The evidences of spirit fruit are indicators of a healthy spirit-heart.

It's not what goes in that makes us a healthy Christian.

Not the amount of bible knowledge,
Church attendance,
Following the 'rules'
Being religious.

It's what comes from the heart.

When I was a university student

I met a Catholic Nun as part of my holiday job.

I was only with her for 10 minutes but in that short time
she shattered my bigoted view of Catholics.

She radiated love, joy and peace

in a way I had never encountered before.

She was a person in whom you could see Jesus.

You know – it's what comes from the heart.

44 years ago when I was a student at Baptist College
a group from the church I was going to
went down to the little town of Ohura,
to take a service at the little Methodist church there.

One of our youth was teaching in the area and told us
she had been to the church and they had not talked about Jesus.
So we offered to take the service one Sunday
and I realised that the salvation of Ohura depended on me.
I had to give them the gospel or they would never hear it.

When we got there we met the head lay-person in the church
– the owner of the general store
who everybody loved, respected,
trusted and shared their problems with.

The man who met all the men when they arrived
to stay at the minimum security prison there,
who visited them while they were there,
and who took them to the station when they left.

The man who organised for the prisoners
to come to church every Sunday where they prepared
a flash morning tea for them,
and invited them to their homes for lunch.

The man in whom I could see Jesus.

And I was going to be their Saviour!!!!
What a lesson that taught me.
It's what comes from the heart.

You know what I want?
You know what I long for?
You know what I desperately desire?

That when people see me they don't see my hypocrisy,
They don't see my 'being right all the time'
– my self-righteousness,
But they see Jesus.

It's all about what comes from the heart.

Please – please - please
Change my heart, O God,
May I be like You.