

Hypocrisy Condemned

Matthew 15:1-20

I believe that one particular problem of our civil justice system is the tendency to show mercy where we ought to pursue justice, and to exact severe justice where we ought to show mercy. In other words, we tend to be lenient when we ought to be strict and we tend to be strict when we ought to be lenient.

The same can often be said of parents toward their children—recognizing that parents can be prone to be lenient at times in discipline when they ought to be more rigorous and overly strict when a gracious leniency might be more beneficial.

So which reaction is right? Which is godly? Mercy or justice? Which is biblical? I hope you can sense that the answer is neither extreme, but you still have to draw a line somewhere in the middle. Where along the continuum from one to the other should we be? Justice or mercy? Strict accountability or leniency?

As we study the gospel account of Jesus' life, one thing that is obvious is that Jesus never struggled with that dilemma. On the one hand, he knew when and how to be lenient. In Matthew 12, we studied Jesus' personal application of Isaiah's prophecy,

Is. 42:1 "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. 2 He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. 3 A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth. 4 He will not fail nor be discouraged, Till He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands shall wait for His law."

Oh, how I appreciate his tenderness. "A bruised reed he will

not break, And smoking flax He will not quench." He will not quench a faintly burning wick. So Jesus knows when to be lenient. He knows when to be gentle. And, on the other end of the spectrum, he also knows when to be strict and rigorous in the pronouncements of justice. Never is that clearer, of course, than when he deals with the Pharisees, and the strongest of Jesus' words are reserved for those self-righteous hypocrites.

We come to another such instance this afternoon in Matthew 15. Jesus immediately confronts the Pharisees with a typically unrelenting harshness. There is no leniency here, with good reason, of course. This text is all about,

I. HYPOCRISY EXPOSED.

Jesus is asked by the Pharisees an accusing question. It is the question of a bully, a question intended to trap Jesus, to make him look back. It is a question that accuses Jesus of breaking the law; more accurately, as Matthew records it, it was an accusation that Jesus was breaking the tradition of the elders. To the self-righteous Pharisee, that was even worse than breaking one of God's laws, for God's laws had become largely irrelevant.

v.1-2

The question was about hand-washing before you eat. Now, we could certainly talk about the benefits of that, and any mothers of young children probably have to repeat that instructions nearly every day. Wash your hands before you eat. But that's not what this is all about. This is about a ceremonial washing, a carry-over from the Old Covenant system filled with outward and external washings. And we need to remember the clear explanation of Hebrews 9, speaking of all the ceremonies of that OT temple.

Heb. 9:9 "It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who

performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.”

The trouble was, these Pharisees thought that the hand-washing could actually make the worshipper “perfect in regard to the conscience.” And the failure to observe this tradition of the elders was seen as a matter of the conscience. A sin. The trouble was, however, that this was nothing but,

A. A focus upon man-made tradition.

They thought more highly of themselves, however, and they thought their traditions actually had the same effect as God’s law, equally binding as God’s own commandments. And the only explanation of that is that they thought themselves to be the accurate and authoritative interpreters of God’s law. They thought themselves to be the ones responsible to explain and apply God’s law to the people.

So they stopped being ministers of God’s law, and became magistrates who made up their own laws. They stopped declaring what God had said and starting legislating their own rules. And they went far beyond God’s word and, even worse, missed the whole point of the law.

The law wasn’t given by God in order to let certain people exalt themselves in their own pride and self-satisfaction. The law wasn’t given by God so that some people could boast of themselves and of their accomplishments. And God never intended nor allows mere men to share in his authority.

So let me say it clearly, man-made tradition does not bear the authority of God. A focus upon man-made tradition actually diminishes the law of God, and such a focus will almost always be

a manifestation of hypocrisy. In other words, the focus upon man-made tradition is a wrong-headed opportunity to exalt the ability of man to conform.

So this hand-washing tradition of the elders had nothing to do with hygiene, it had nothing to do with the dangers of eating food with dirty hands. Instead, it had to do with the proud hypocrisy of the Pharisees. As one commentator puts it, “They substituted mere legalism for true piety, outward conformity to tradition for the attitude of heart and mind.”

This was, of course, nothing but,

B. A focus upon external regulations.

For the Pharisees, the issue never became a matter of the heart. And it always impresses me how, even in the Old Testament when the external form of holiness for God’s people was so prominent, even then the godly and faithful understood that what mattered was the heart! Thus David’s confession of sin,

Psalm 51:10 “Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.... 15 O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. 16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.”

A contrite heart, a repentant heart. That’s what God wishes to see in us. Not any particular tradition of men. Even the Old Testament prophets understood. God’s law was not a focus upon external regulations. All of the regulations, even in the Old Covenant, were to be a demonstration of the sincerity of the heart. For example, Hosea.

Hosea 6:6 “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

Micah 6:6 “With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

Now, before I go on, let me make an observation; and an application. The observation is that there is a little bit of these Pharisees in all of us. How easily we can make ourselves satisfied with external regulations. How easily we can replace the true worship of God with outward ceremonies. And, along with that, man-made traditions.

It’s easy to criticize the Pharisees, for they were wicked people, their blatant hypocrisy is on open display for us all to see. But how dangerous it is, and much more subtle, to forget that within your own flesh there are those same tendencies and temptations. It’s easy to become a hypocrite, because we all want to look good. We all to make ourselves look good.

And sometimes we want to avoid the hard matters of doing business with your own soul. Beloved, “Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil?” Is a burnt offering enough? Is an outward act sufficient? Sometimes we think that it is, some external ceremony or tradition is enough.

But no, it isn’t. A thousand times, no! God wants a broken heart, a broken and contrite heart, a humble heart that confesses its sin. God wants your kindness, heart-felt kindness not merely outward performances of some man-made duty. God wants your humility. That’s the sacrifice that brings him pleasure. Not the

boasting of your self-righteousness, but the confession of your sins. Again, an Old Testament prophet,

Jer. 9:23 Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; 24 But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the LORD.”

So be on guard against any remnant of Phariseeism in your heart. Be on guard against any emphasis upon man-made tradition or external regulations. Be on guard over your own soul, so that you don’t play the role of the hypocrite, pretending to be something before God when you are not, thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think.

2 Cor. 10:17 But “he who [boasts], let him [boast] in the LORD.” 18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.”

There is a clear warning for us here. For not only is the hypocrisy of the Pharisees exposed, it is soundly condemned.

II. HYPOCRISY CONDEMNED.

Just look at Jesus’ response, beginning with the obvious reality that he didn’t answer their question. Trick questions are not hard for Jesus—he just refuses to answer them. Those who try to trap Jesus into saying something wrong would always be frustrated. Those who use leading questions in order to hide their own hypocrisy will not get any satisfaction from Jesus. He didn’t owe them an answer, but responds to their question with one of his own, a question intend not only to expose their hypocrisy but to condemn it.

v.3-6

The point is, according to Jesus, that while the Pharisees have these external, man-made regulations that are so important to them, these traditions of the elders, at the same time,

A. They break God's commandments.

They accuse Jesus of breaking one of their commandments, so Jesus responds by accurately accusing them of breaking God's commandments. They think so highly of themselves that they would dare to accuse Jesus of being guilty, but it is they who are guilty! And that isn't hard to demonstrate.

Take the fifth commandment, honor your father and your mother. Jesus also quotes an Old Covenant application of the civil punishment prescribed for those who break the commandment, namely capital punishment. In the Old Testament theocratic society, there could be no lesser punishment, for the breakdown of the authority which God established would ultimately destroy the whole nation. The New Testament application of the ultimate punishment would be excommunication, as the visible church and the civil government are now separated.

So don't be confused by that regulation that specified the punishment in the Old Covenant, a punishment that is no longer carried out since the church is no longer a nation exercising civil authority. Yet the law remains. The validity of the law remains. And the guilt of the Pharisees is magnified by the reality that their offense was, in fact, a capital offense in the time of Old Testament Israel.

They are guilty of breaking God's commandments, because their tradition allows them, permits them, to ignore the command to honor their parents. Specifically, they pretend to be religious, giving to God the honor due to their parents, as if those two things are contradictory!

The issue was money, support. It was the care that children should give to their parents, and the children, the Pharisees, would free themselves from that responsibility to care for their parents by claiming to give their support and money to God! They would dedicate their money to God, and withhold it from the necessary care required by their parents. They would claim to be spiritual, they would claim an allegiance and faithfulness to God, and use that as an excuse to neglect the needs of their own parents.

That's called hypocrisy. As Jesus puts it, "made the commandment of God of no effect by [their] tradition." "They made void the word." They emptied it, they made it count for nothing, they invalidated it. To the contrary, however, the proper application of that fifth commandment is very clearly explained by Paul when he wrote to Timothy,

1 Tim. 5:8 "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

Strong language, isn't it? And you can't claim devotion to God as an excuse to exempt yourself from the duties and obligations of his law. You cannot cancel the requirements of God's moral law under the pretense of some higher obedience to God. No, beloved, the law is that highest level. There is no "law" that God would require of you that transcend his revealed law such that you can ignore what is written!

There is another danger, though, one which the Pharisees also demonstrate. It is the great offense of limiting the honor you give to God to your outward actions, to the neglect of the heart. You ought never to pit the spirit of the law against the letter of the law, as if the matters of the heart superseded the requirements of the commandments, but neither can you seek to keep the

commandments in a merely external form without the involvement of the heart. It is vain and empty worship to offer to God an external form of devotion and service without the full and complete commitment of your heart.

That's what's wrong with the Pharisees.

B. They do not honor God with their hearts.

And Jesus makes that as plain as can be.

v.7-9

That passage from Isaiah stands as a damning definition of the worst form of hypocrisy. The pretense of honor to God, with the words of their mouths. But no honor is given to God in their heart. And the law of God always addresses the heart, and the outward duties and responsibilities required by the law are always to be the expression of the heart, so that when asked to identify the greatest of the commandments, Jesus replied,

Mat. 22:37 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and great commandment."

Please note that heart doesn't refer to the emotions, as we might be tempted to define the word today. Rather, it refers to the inner man, the soul of a man. It refers to the motive and the desires of the inner person, rather than merely his outward performance.

The Old Testament has a very plain and pointed description of that sort of love, utilizing the outward sign of the old covenant.

Listen,

Deut. 10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your

heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? 14 Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. 15 The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. 16 Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer."

Circumcise your heart. Talk about mixing metaphors. The Apostle Paul would elaborate a bit on that in,

Rom. 2:28 "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God."

Such a damning indictment from Jesus, as it was from Isaiah.

v.8 "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."

Beloved, let that be an appropriate warning to you. Let that be an appropriate warning to examine the motives of your own heart. For whenever you study the Pharisees, you need to be able to admit that there is a little bit of the Pharisee in all of us. It is an easy trap to fall into, an easy temptation to fail to resist. In this case, the hypocrisy is condemned. Please be sure that it never finds a place within your own heart. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart."

Jesus then gives a little further explanation to his disciples as he teaches and trains them. So what we see in verses 10-20 is,

III. HYPOCRISY CORRECTED.

The correction is again plain and simple. The point is easy to explain,

A. Evil is not of external origin.

v.10-11

v.15-17

It is easy to get deceived. Easy to be tricked by your own dullness. It is easy to think that the problem of evil, the problem of sin, is something external to you, something that entered you from the outside. And Jesus corrects that error. The problem is not what you eat or drink. The problem is not your environment. The problem is not all the external stimuli that bombard you. Evil is not something that enters your soul from the outside. To the contrary,

B. Evil originates in your heart.

v.18

The examples are obvious.

v.9-20

So when you lose your temper, that evil came from your own heart. You cannot blame the other driver who cut you off. You cannot blame the other person who incited you, or who offended you. You cannot blame the stress of your life and the busyness of your schedule. The evil came from your own heart.

When you have evil thoughts, they come from your heart. When you have impure thoughts, they, too, come from your heart. The problem is not the immodesty of the young woman that you saw. That might well be a sin on her behalf, but it is not excuse for your sin, for your impurity, for your lust. It is not what you see that causes you to sin, but rather the desires of your own heart.

Same thing with lying and slander, and I hope you see Jesus is addressing the moral issues defined by the ten commandments. When you speak evil, the words come from within you, from within your own heart. Your lying and your slander is a product of your own heart, and it is that sinful heart that defiles you. Not some external tradition like washing your hands.

I hope you see the point, and feel it within your own heart, even as you worship the Lord this afternoon. It is something you should feel and experience often, daily, that your heart is defiled. Confess that to God that he might cleanse your heart! Don't simply confess the outward evidence of the sin, confess the impurity and defilement of your heart. And then, pray as David prayed in,

Ps. 51:10 "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

As you do that, be assured of this, that,

Ps. 51:17 "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise."

So please don't go away from this sermon thinking about how evil the hearts of the Pharisees must have been. Rather come away praying as David prayed in,

Ps. 139:23 "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting."