

## Sermon Notes - August 29, 2021

### “Heart Religion”

(Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

A few years ago, there was a man named Kirk who was having a bad day and a bad week. Any of you ever have a bad day - everything just goes wrong, no matter what you do? Most of us have experienced that. Well, he had had a bad couple of weeks - everything that could go wrong went wrong. One night he went to bed and he couldn't sleep. He said, “I was laying there in the dark and I said, ‘Why me, God? Why is all this happening to me? Why are you doing this to me?’” He laid there a few more moments, kept thinking about all the horrible things, and he said, “Why me, God? Why are you doing this to me?” All of a sudden, he said he heard a clap of thunder, saw a flash of lightning in the window, the house started shaking, the pictures on the wall started falling off, the ceiling was coming in, and a big hand reached down and pointed his finger at his chest. The booming voice of God said, “Because you bug me, Kirk!” Well, most of us know that God doesn't cause bad things to happen to good people, but I wonder if sometimes the way we live and the way we do things doesn't bug God. “You just don't get it, guys. You just don't get it.”

I think that's what was going on with Jesus and the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus didn't dislike the Pharisees -- he didn't hate them. They were godly people; they were observing the Sabbath; they studied the scriptures and the traditions. They prayed three times a day; they dressed the part; they acted the part; they were doing all the “right” stuff, but their heart wasn't in it and Jesus knew it. In this passage he is confronting them about the fact that God's concerned about our internal more than he is our external. What's in our heart? Do we have “heart religion”?

Jesus and the Pharisees differed in several ways. One of the things that bothered Jesus about the Pharisees was their hypocrisy - pretending to be something that they are not; not being genuine - their outside and their inside didn't match. Jesus accused them of being hypocrites. He said, “Isaiah the prophet was right when he accused you of being hypocrites because you honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far

from me. You honor the traditions of men, but your worship to me is in vain.” Your heart’s just not there.

Jesus also was upset with the Pharisees because they got caught up in the small details rather than the big picture. Let me give you an example of that: If you go back and read this passage of scripture, the Pharisees and Scribes had something called “the Corban law” -- it was a human tradition that if you, in your lifetime as a couple, decided to take money and dedicate it to the Temple, you could not use it for anything else. If your parents were living and they got sick, you couldn’t use any of that money towards them because you had already pledged it to the Temple. Jesus was saying, “You’ve got a fine way of disobeying the commandments of God, but following the traditions of men. You tell men that they have to keep that money until the end of life and give it to the Temple, but your parents are hurting right now and they need that money.” Which is the greater commandment – to honor God and honor your father and mother or to give it to the Temple? Does God want it for his work? ... Sure, but he also taught us to love one another and to honor our parents -- that’s one of the Mosaic commandments. Jesus got them on the small things – they didn’t see the big picture that they were disobeying God’s commandments.

The Pharisees also tended to be exclusive rather than inclusive. You see, the closer they got to God, they believed that it made them righteous, pure, and clean, and everybody else was unrighteous and unclean. ***The Godly life that Jesus was trying to teach us is about learning to see ourselves with our own purities and impurities and not just look at others, but look at ourselves.*** Jesus was teaching us to be inclusive, not exclusive – to draw a circle that draws people in. The Pharisees were pushing people out -- “Here, we’re the right ones; we’re the righteous; we’re the clean; we’re the pure, not you.” They were being exclusive and Jesus got upset with them.

In this particular scripture, the Pharisees got upset with Jesus’ disciples for not washing their hands before eating a meal. I want to tell you a cute story: Queen Victoria, years ago in England, was having a diplomatic reception. She invited 500 dignitaries. The Chief guest-of-honor was an African Chieftain. Now, the meal went well; the speech went well, and all of a sudden, the attendants for the Queen brought in

the finger bowls (to wipe your hands after you get through eating). Well, the Chieftain didn't know the British tradition - that that bowl was to wash your hands. He picked up the bowl with both hands and drank the water. The 500 dignitaries were sitting there like, "What's the Queen going to do? What are we supposed to do?" Finally, after a pregnant-pause, the Queen picked up her bowl in her hands, broke the rules, and drank the water. All 500 guests drank the water from their finger bowls. Queen Victoria broke the rules - the British tradition and as queen, she had the right to do so.

The Scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus because he was a Rabbi and they thought he was responsible for the behavior of his disciples. They said, "Jesus, your disciples are not washing their hands before they eat. They are unclean. Why do they not follow the traditions of the Elders?" And Jesus in essence said, "You get so caught up in the small things that you forget the commandments of God. ***God is more concerned about your heart than the exteriors.*** You're always doing everything to look right, to appear righteous and clean, but your hearts are far from me."

This morning, I told Marty that I loved hearing his music because he doesn't just play the notes, he plays with his heart. Have you ever noticed that when somebody plays with their heart, sometimes it just moves you - it just lifts your spirits? Sometimes you want to tap your feet or you just want to sing the words in your head to the song. Marty has a way of doing that.

Sometimes what God is wanting us to do is to have heart-religion that moves us and lifts us -- it causes us to live in a different way. God wants to be in our heart in such a way that it affects what we say and how we act. Jesus said, "It's not the things from the outside that defile us -- it's what's in our heart -- the lust, the greed, the selfishness, the self-righteousness, the pride - all those things, because they're going to come out in what we say and what we do." ***Jesus wanted the Pharisees to learn that God prefers love and compassion over man-made traditions.*** Jesus was not against tradition. He went to the Temple on the Sabbath; he read the scriptures; he prayed - he was not against their traditions. We have the Lord's Supper - Jesus gave us that. It's a sacrament, a tradition, we do. He was not against those things, but he wanted us to

have our heart in it. You know, we can say the Apostle's Creed every Sunday -- but whether you say it every Sunday and it's just going through the words or you memorize it, doesn't make us holy. It's only when we believe what we're saying. Have you ever noticed every once in a while, I will make you think about the words of the Lord's Prayer? Sometimes I have Marty play it or somebody sing it because I want you to think about what we're saying, and say it in your heart, not just go through the words. God wants it in our heart, folks. He's interested in heart-religion. **He wants our deeds over our creeds; our love and compassion over our traditions.** The internal matters as much or more to God than the external -- because if the heart is right with God, it will show in the way we live.

Some of you know the name Andrew Young. He was a Mayor at one time in Atlanta, Georgia. He served under President Carter's administration as a U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He was married and had four children. His first three children all were very obedient children; they finished high school; wanted to go on to college and had successful careers. His youngest daughter was more the one who fought back against Dad's stern words and she was a bit rebellious. She decided, when she finished high school, that she wanted to be a singer, a dancer, or an actress. She went off on her own trying to find her way in New York. One day she came back home to Georgia and she told her mom and dad that she was going to Uganda to work for Habitat for Humanity. Her dad said, "Whaaat?" She said, "Dad, I know that's what God wants me to do and I'm going to Uganda to work with Habitat for Humanity for two years." Her dad said, "You know Uganda doesn't have a good government. Why, if you get over there and you do something wrong, there's no recourse. They can punish you in any way they want, honey! Are you sure you want to go to Uganda?" "Daddy, I'm going to Uganda." Well, a few days later he and his wife took her to the airport. When they put her on the plane, he said, "Well, God, I guess you're giving me a message, aren't you? You didn't call us to be respectable Christians, you called us to be responsible Christians, and to translate our love of God into love for others. My daughter is doing just that. It took my daughter for me to learn that lesson."

God wants us to have religion that's in our heart. You see, when he's in our heart, it makes a difference in how we live. We don't just go through the motions. Do any of you remember when you're in grief or depression, how you go through the motions? When somebody's given you the shock of somebody who died that was close to you, you tend to go through the motions. I remember when one of my brothers died years ago -- it was a sudden truck accident that killed he and his son. I remember just going through the motions. I met with the youth group and said, "Listen, guys. I have to go out of town. I don't know when I'll be back." I didn't even tell them what had happened, just "I gotta go. Y'all do whatever they need and I'll see you when I get back." One of the ladies in the church rode with me. I had to go pick-up my youngest brother and we were going to go and meet the rest of my family. I was in shock for days. I'll never forget something the people in the funeral home told my family. They looked at my brothers and I and told us that we all looked like we were in shock - like we just couldn't believe it.

Sometimes we go through the motions, and sometimes we do that - even in church! We read our Bibles, we pray, we say the Apostle's Creed, we do things and go through the motions. But, God's interested in us living out heart-religion. Your heart is what matters to God most.

I want to challenge us to think about our faith and how we live our life. Do we just play it with our fingers like on a piano or do we play it with heart? Dr. Frederick Buechner said, "You can teach a piano student how to hold their hands and how to sit. You can teach them all the right notes. They can memorize a piece of music and play it beautifully, with accuracy. But, do they play it with their heart or just their fingers?" - When they play it with their heart, it moves people - it lifts your spirits - it makes you want to tap your toes and sing. God wants us to have heart-religion that moves us into action. Don't just go through the motions. How's your faith? How's your heart? God bless you.