Loving Him Better and More

April 29, 2018

Matthew 15:1-9; Matthew 7:21-23 (NIV; NLT)

Imagine this: Jesus walks in the door right now, strides up the center aisle, turns around, looks at us, and calls us Pharisees? “Who, me!? This is Skagway First Presbyterian. We aren’t Jewish.” You might ask him if he’s in the wrong place and politely redirect him to another town with a synagogue. Or you might protest that we aren’t Pharisees here; we’re born-again Christians. This is clearly a case of mistaken identity. Is he lost? Maybe his Google Maps app isn’t working today. EXCEPT --

One of the things about Jesus is that he’s the only one who has never been lost, ever. Of course he knows where he is and who we are. So what’s he doing here in our church accusing us of being Pharisees? Most Christian writers don’t talk about the Pharisees that Jesus knew very sympathetically. In our passage, Jesus calls them “hypocrites” who “nullify the word of God.” (v 6-7) We don’t want to be lumped in with that group!

In this passage in Matthew 15, Pharisees and scribes, who were the Jewish religious leaders and experts in the law, have traveled from Jerusalem to confront Jesus again about yet another Jewish religious tradition he has violated. They are hostile and out to destroy him because his radical words and actions are beginning to undermine their authority with the people. In this instance, they attack him for allowing his disciples to “break the tradition of the elders” (v 2) by eating without first washing their hands. From our point of view, maybe they just sound petty – handwashing? Anything to get Jesus in trouble!

But handwashing was one aspect of the strict Jewish tradition of cleanliness passed down from generation to generation. Cleanliness was not about personal hygiene, but about ceremonial cleanliness or religious purity. Cleanliness was considered part of the essential qualifications for spirituality. Listen to what one rabbi taught: he said, “’Zeal leads to cleanliness, cleanliness to ritual purity, ritual purity to self-control, self-control to holiness, holiness to humility, humility to fear of sin, fear of sin to saintliness, and saintliness to the Holy Spirit.’” Wow! This was indeed serious. The rabbis and teachers insisted on careful, ceremonial washings, especially when handling one’s own food. Another wrote, “Whoever eats bread without first washing his hands is as though he had sinned with a harlot. Whoever makes light of the washing of his hands will be uprooted from the world. Whoever eats bread without scouring his hands is as though he eats unclean bread.” Another thought such a person should be excommunicated. They were offended that Jesus, a Teacher in Israel, had not taught his disciples to observe these binding traditions by which the Jews lived and died. (Bethany Bible Church, sermon).

Jesus answered the Pharisees by turning the tables on their argument. They asked him why his disciples “break the tradition of the elders” (v 2) by not washing their hands before eating. Jesus then accuses them of breaking God’s command to honor father and mother. Washing hands, honoring parents - what’s the connection here? Jesus seems to be changing the subject with this seemingly unrelated example. But he’s actually pointing out the unintended consequences of adhering so inflexibly to any tradition. Just as they are strict about handwashing, the Pharisees also are strict about adhering to the laws governing gifts made to the Temple. By sticking to tradition concerning gift-giving, the Pharisees end up breaking a more serious law, God’s fifth commandment to honor father and mother. Here’s how that works: According to the law, if someone pledged support to the Temple for God’s work to be done, then the money or resources had to be turned over to the temple when he died. No one else could use it. Even if it was a pledge made rashly, without much thought, it was binding because the gift was a gift set apart for God.

Leaving your money to the temple to support God’s work sounds good, doesn’t it? The problem was that you couldn’t change your mind, or modify anything. In Jewish law and tradition, oaths were binding. What if your elderly parents needed your support? The tradition said, “too bad.” Once you pledged your resources to God, rabbinical law forbade you to change your mind and give the gift to your parents, even if they were sick and poor. Jesus demonstrates how sinful this “religious tradition” had become. The tradition caused them to transgress the clear commandment of God to “Honor your father and your mother.” Is religious tradition greater than God’s law and his word? Jesus says the Pharisees nullified the word of God (v 6). They made the word of God “of no effect” by their tradition. The Greek word “akuroo” can be translated several ways, but with the same awful outcome: it means they made God’s word void of authority, or nullified it (NIV), or invalidated it (NASB), or made “void the word of God” (ESV). Now this should be grounds for excommunication or worse by anybody’s standards!

We know traditions aren’t necessarily bad. But religious traditions must be examined in the light of Scripture and God’s truth. The law did **not** intend to make void the word of God, but to uphold it. The Pharisees needed to take a step back and reassess the unintended consequences of this and all other laws created by religious tradition. In trying to preserve tradition they ended up going too far. They made the “tradition of the elders” into their religion. They forgot about who they were and who God is, and their relationship with God. Their hearts weren’t in it, and so they were hypocrites.

One preacher concludes that “. . . religious ‘traditions’ can easily become sinful ‘transgressions’ – especially when they cause us to set aside the clear commands of God’s word, and [those traditions] become a substitute for entering a true relationship with God by faith.” (Bethany 4)

I believe those Pharisees were motivated, at least in part, by fear, but also by love. To begin with, they were afraid that Jesus and his followers would upset the social and political status quo by which they lived. Jesus was a radical, and everybody knows the trouble that a radical rabble rouser can cause. They feared they might lose control over the Jewish people, or have to associate with unclean Gentiles. They might even suffer financially. Even the Temple wouldn’t be safe if Jesus was allowed to bring in the New World Order.

But on a personal level, and quite apart from what the radical Jesus does or doesn’t do, they’re gripped by the fear that they won’t measure up to God’s standards, that they won’t be able to do enough to be pure in his eyes, that their worship won’t be acceptable to God. Out of their love for God they have become over-zealous, taken things to extremes to make sure they get it right. Just look at the rules for washing before eating, and not touching unclean things. How obsessive are those practices, and how impossible to live up to. How could a person ever accomplish anything else in his life if he worked every day just to keep those laws.

In the beginning, the law was a protective law. Everything that was added to it over time was intended to help the people remember who they were while they wandered in the desert waiting to enter the homeland. It was intended to keep Jewish life and religious practice intact. Today we have traditions that do the same things for us. But over time the “tradition of the elders” had become the religion. The rules and rituals had to be imposed, had to be kept and insisted upon, and judgment was harsh for those who fell short. And remember, it’s not just your neighbor you want to please, it’s God. At least your neighbor can’t punish you with eternal damnation. I’d be afraid, too.

Remember the words Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:21-23). Jesus warned that not everyone who claims to be a Christian will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He told the people,

Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord,’ ‘Lord,’ did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evil-doers!’

I’ve had a difficult time in my walk as a Christian reconciling these words with my understanding that whoever believes in Jesus will be saved. I understand better now how it’s about relationship. Your heart has to be in it. It’s about my heart and God’s heart. My actions and words are empty unless God and I are one through the blood of Jesus. That oneness is much more profound than I used to imagine.

One preacher makes these comments: “I fear that there will be many people who will hear those dreadful words from Jesus who thought that they had a relationship with God, simply because they were careful to observe the "religious traditions" of men. In the eyes of other men, they would have been the most "religious" people of all . . . How easy it would be to become lulled into a false sense of "relationship" through "religious traditions!" How easy it would be to think that such traditions are making us close to God; when in reality, we have no relationship with Him at all!” (Bethany 10)

You see, it’s not that the Pharisees don’t love God, but that they’ve forgotten that to approach God means to have a receptive heart and listening ears. They’ve forgotten that a relationship with God means one-on-one heart and soul time. Think about young Samuel lying asleep in the night near his master Eli’s bed. It’s dark and quiet; the tabernacle is empty. God speaks. It’s just God and Samuel in the dark of midnight. Think about Moses and the burning bush in the desert wilderness. Just God and Moses. Moses argues with God, but God answers. Moses’ and Samuel’s lives changed forever because they had open hearts and ears. Here I am, Lord, speak to me, use me.

In their frantic need to do everything right, the Pharisees seem to have forgotten these stories of intense relationship with God which were also part of their tradition. Heart and soul time, one-on-one with God is where worship and love for God are nourished and grown. Think about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Only that deep, soul-baring outpouring of Jesus’ heart as he spoke and listened to God could prepare him for what was to come, and it sprang out of his deep love for God his Father. He knew God was with him and hearing him. It was just Jesus and his Father in the garden.

So why would Jesus come here and address us as Pharisees? Like the Pharisees, we really do love God and want to worship him in a way that pleases him, but maybe, like the Pharisees, we sometimes forget how. Have we forgotten how to worship “in spirit and in truth”? Have we forgotten the one-on-one, midnight hour, burning bush, just me and God conversations? I love this image of relationship in the book *The Shack*: The main character in the book sits on the end of a dock with his brother Jesus, swinging his legs out over the water, watching the star-crammed heavens and talking and listening. When did we last commune with Jesus like this? All the forms and rituals we practice that help us remember who we are as Christians will disappear when the Kingdom comes. It will just be us and our Father God, and our brother Jesus, and the precious Holy Spirit. Forms will fall away, and the quality of relationship will remain.

Here is a challenge for me and for you: “If you claim to be a Christian, ask yourself **WHY:** why do you attend church services, offer your prayers, sing hymns, give of your resources, help others? Is your motive love and communion with God? God knows, but do you know? Take a good look at the religious things you do, and examine yourself. Make sure that your worship of God is motivated by pure love, (Stanly 5) that it’s one-on-one heart and soul time, even in church in the midst of the crowd. It’s you and Jesus in the wilderness or the garden. There will be times when we won’t have the trappings of worship and tradition to support our communion with God. Who are we in relationship to God? Will he know us and greet us joyfully at the end of time?

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