

Pentecost 14B 29 August 2021
Mark 7: 1-8,14,15,21-23
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus] said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Let's pray:

'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' I think this is why I've always treated the word doctrine like something to avoid stepping in on the footpath. If you do, it sticks and it stinks and it's impossible to scrape off. There's nothing wrong with the church's doctrines (teachings), rather, what gets up my nose, is how our endless debates over them prevent people from developing an intimate relationship with Jesus. While it's true that our Church is orthodox as far as her doctrine of grace is concerned, I'm not so sure that we're always a Church that's willing to follow the path of costly grace.

PROBLEM – Hypocrisy (unrighteousness).

Now, I want you to check your pulse. Go on. Got a heartbeat? No? Yes? "You hypocrite! I accuse you of abandoning God's commandments and upholding human traditions." What's your response to that? Are you offended? Do you try to shrink back into a dark corner and hide from this truth or do you put your hand up and say, "Yep. That's me"? Who's game? Let's see:

- Do you calculate what you give charitably or do you give as though your left hand doesn't know what your right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3)?
- Do you obey the eighth commandment to the letter of the law as it appears in [Exodus 20:16] or in the spirit it's intended as we're taught in Luther's *Large Catechism*?

- Do you serve at a soup kitchen because it seems like the “right” thing to do? Or do you serve with the honest desire to connect with and show care for other human beings?
- Do you read the Bible because that’s what you’re supposed to do? Or have you always read it out of an insatiable desire to encounter God?
- Do you barrack for the Crows or Port?

So, how about that heartbeat? You’ve all got one so you’re all hypocrites. Welcome to planet earth. Don’t worry. You’ll never be lonely. You’ve got 7.9 billion mates.

Why the heart? In Scripture, the heart is the seat of indwelling sin (Romans 7 [21]). It’s where our emotions and desires begin. It’s from our heart that sin launches: ‘there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile’ (Mark 7:15). Ecclesiastes is always handy for a blunt assessment: ‘This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead’ [9:3].

All human beings follow the desires of the heart: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. Jesus calls it as it is and warns us that these things are bad for us; leave us lifeless. Are these the things we want to guide and teach us, to define us, to pass on to ‘your children and your children’s children’ (Deuteronomy 4:9)?

Jesus compels us to examine ourselves forensically and compare our corrupted nature and guilt with God’s holiness and righteousness. I, for one, detest the ugliness I see in me. I don’t like the old Adam that’s falling to bits or the black muck that lurks in the dark recesses of my soul.

So, what’s the antidote to paying lip service to Jesus and keeping our hearts far from his divine life?

SOLUTION – Righteousness (keeping the commandment of God).

Live righteously. Embrace and live the commandment of God. If the charge against us is ‘hypocrisy’ (Mark 7:6); ‘abandoning the commandment of God’ (Mark 7:8), then surely, the solution is to ‘keep the commandments of the Lord y[our] God’ (Deuteronomy 4:2). James suggests that we achieve this turn-around (repentance) by moving from being hearers of the word to doers of the word. From honouring with our lips to honouring with our actions. By walking in Jesus’ footsteps:

- ‘Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.
- Rid yourselves of all sordidness and wickedness.
- Hear the word that has the power to save your souls and be humble in acting upon what you hear.
- Bridle your tongue.
- Care for orphans and widows in their distress.
- Keep yourself unstained by the world’ (James 1:19-27).

Friends, talk is cheap; putting faith into action, following Jesus, is tiring, emotionally draining, and costly, as many lifetimes of discipleship and martyrdom attest to. Yet, it takes you into the awesome sphere of God’s almighty influence. Mother Theresa captured this beautifully when she said, “Faith in action is love, and love in action is service. By transforming that faith into living acts of love, we put ourselves in contact with God Himself, with Jesus our Lord.” Hence, to live righteously is to love. Love is the commandment of God that Jesus is talking about [see Matthew 22:34-40; also 1 John 3], love is the gospel, therefore, as Paul tells us, love, ultimately, is the only doctrine that matters:

- *‘If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*
- *If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*
- *If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing’ (1 Corinthians 13: [1-3]).*

- *‘Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*
- *Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.*
- *Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*
- *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*
- *Love never ends’ [4-8].*
- *‘Faith, hope, and love go together; and the greatest of these is love’ [13].*

Saints, the path of righteousness, a life of putting love into service, Christian discipleship, is a hard road to travel that leads to the cross of costly grace. In fact, it’s a crushing burden to bear and an impossible task but for one thing: ‘Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’ (James 1:17). Before Jesus could ascend; before Jesus could return to the Father’s right hand, he had to come down from heaven to be our guiding light. He walked the path of perfect obedience in order to meet the demands of God’s perfect law. He bore our shame and guilt on the cross in order to defeat sin, death and the devil, that we may live the new life of righteousness before God. The life we have because Christ is our righteousness.

Justification.

Bishop Bo Giertz crafts this orientation masterfully in his book *The Hammer of God*, where the old pastor schools the young curate on justification by grace saying, “‘The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks His walking cane through it and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with Him. That is how it is.’”*

Jesus enables us to live the Christian life unstained by the world; to walk the narrow path of costly grace. Jesus shifts us from being far from God in worldly hypocrisy to a seat in God’s heavenly presence. Jesus is why God no longer looks down on our indwelling corruption and our sins. God in his grace looks only upon his dear Son, Jesus Christ. God demands holy, undefiled, perfection - no less, and Jesus’ righteousness makes us no less.

Paraphrasing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Happy are they who've gone before us, to discover that grace is costly because it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Happy are the simple followers of Jesus who having been overcome by his grace, are able to sing his praises with humbleness of heart. Happy are they who, knowing that grace, can live in the world without being of it, who, by following Jesus Christ, are so assured of their heavenly citizenship that they are truly free to live their lives in this world. Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship. Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the word of grace is a fount of mercy.'** Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Giertz, Bo. 1960. *The Hammer of God*, Augsburg Publishing House, MN, page 147.

**Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1984. *The Cost of Discipleship*, Thirteenth impression, SCM Press Ltd, London, page 47, translated from the German *Nachfolge*, first published in 1937.
