

WHERE ALL THE TROUBLE COMES FROM

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Matthew 15:1-20

The disciples were surprised that the Lord was so little troubled about the negative reaction of the Pharisees to His teaching. They had been shocked at the offence that the Pharisees had taken to the Lord's teaching and that it should have been so controversial. Were the disciples still a little too in awe of the Pharisees? Did they find it difficult to accept that the Pharisees could have got it so totally wrong? The Lord had to teach them that the troubles in the world and in the lives of men in their relationship with God do not arise out of an insufficiency of hand-washing or external cleanliness but come from within, from the human heart.

1. It is not about washing and food.

The Lord Jesus was forever provoking people by His teaching. He did not agree with the teaching of the religious leaders, and this in turn would lead to more questions and criticisms of Him. The Pharisees put a lot of emphasis on religious ritual. They thought this would meet with the approval of God and keep them in His approval. They only had to follow the rules, and God would be happy with them. Yet in this reckoning, the Pharisees thought the Lord was easily satisfied with some token religious observance and they too were easily satisfied, that there was nothing further that was required of them. They lived with an idea that the environment was full of contaminants that conveyed uncleanness through touch and other contact. They looked on Gentile people as unclean and could not, therefore, eat with them because you would pick up their defilement and that would spoil their imagined relationship with God.

So when the Pharisees saw the disciples of the Lord Jesus not washing their hands before they ate, they were offended (v12). It showed that Lord Jesus, the teacher of these disciples, did not respect the traditions of the elders (v2). This was a challenge to their belief system and their authority, and they would not allow it to pass unchallenged. But they were surprised then the Lord took them to task and showed them that they were guilty of a real transgression of an actual God-given, not man-made, commandment. They were allowing people to treat their parents shabbily, which was a breach of the Fifth Commandment. All this was proof that their hearts were not in the right place. They did not understand what the will of God was, and their religion was based on man-made rules and ideas at the expense of the clear laws of God.

2. It's about the heart.

We can see in v18, and also in v8, that true religion is about the human heart. The Pharisees were not true worshippers. Their hearts were elsewhere, thinking more about the commandments of men rather than the real will of God. They could not see it, but their zeal for these traditions showed just how little they understood about having a relationship with God.

They should have realized that the Lord has far higher standards than can be satisfied with obsessive observance of rules. There is no easy and quick fix that can be accomplished in securing the Lord's blessing. Certainly, un-commanded ritual hand-washing was never going to bring people in to God's favour. These things were just a distraction from the real matter, which is that the trouble that separates us from God and needs remedy runs much deeper than the Pharisees, or indeed most people realize. The problem is deep within us, in the heart. It is who we are and what we are. And none of this can be overcome or remedied by works. Who we are at heart defiles us, spoils and pollutes us in our thinking and in our actions, making us unclean in the sight of God.

This moral and spiritual rottenness is not contracted through physical proximity to the wrong kind of people. It is something that is endemic in us. It makes us morally ugly and disfigured. If we persist in following the wrong ideas about who we are and how we can find remedy in the sight of God, we will end up in a ditch (v14). It is a suitably defiled destination for defiled people, and carries with it a picture of hell.

3. Heart transplant.

Just as the Pharisees and their teaching needed to be uprooted (v13), so our heart needs 'uprooting' or 'transplanting' so that we can have a new heart in its place. We need a new heart that produces clean things that will in turn lead to clean thoughts and behaviours.

That heart needs, foremostly, to be a forgiven heart. It is a heart that is cleansed through contact with blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. We understand His sacrifice and see that it forgives us for what we are at heart, sinful and disobedient people. Through faith in His Person and work, dying upon the cross in our place, we find forgiveness and pardon. It is a heart that has been transformed and renewed by contact with the Lord and His great love. His dying for His people was such an act of generosity and kindness that it leaves us amazed and grateful. We respond to what we have discovered by being more humble and ready to do His will, not our own. It is, therefore, a changed heart. Our faith is sealed by the Holy Spirit, and new and better things now flow from our hearts. Good thoughts come to us more readily. We desire the good of others more willingly.

So we must ask ourselves, what the Lord asked His disciples, whether we have understood this (v16)? It is not about ritual or following some programme of religious observances. It requires us actually to give these things up, as these are the traditions of men and do not save us from our sins. We need to believe in the blood of Christ to save us and bring us into a good place in His sight. We see in Christ's merits the things we need to be acceptable before the Lord and to bring us eventually into His presence in glory. We have to give our heart away and desire Him to change it and make it holy. We ask Him to take hold of us and to take charge of our life and all that we are. Then we are in a position to love Him and to obey Him.