

HAVE A HEART CONDITION? (Human Or Hypocrisy)



HYPOCRISY

Have you ever wondered why some of the Jews of Jesus' time made such a big thing of legalistic rules about hand-washing and ritual purification? "It's in the Bible!" did you say? Not really. There are some rules about hand-washing for priests handling the holy articles of worship (cf. Exodus 30:19-21). And there are rules about ritual purification for both the priests and their families who ate portions of sacrifices presented at the altar of God (cf. Numbers. 18:8-13).

Somewhere along the way, some highly scrupulous — and I suspect well-intentioned — Jewish scholars began to teach that these rules should be respected by every man and woman who wanted to be holy to the Lord (not **just** the priests) and to all food handling (not **just** the devoted offerings). They quoted texts such as this one in support of their intent to expand the obligations about ablutions and purity to every Israelite: "**Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false**" (Psalms. 24:3-4).

Eventually a party (i.e., denomination) within Judaism bound these rules and many others like them with scrupulous zeal. They came to be known as the Pharisees. While most Christians know the Pharisees as "hypocrites," that is an unfair generalization based on the unpleasant exchanges Jesus had with some of their leaders. Both Jewish and Christian scholars would tell you that, for the most part, the Pharisees were simply conscientious literalists who wanted to be right in everything they did in their religion. I can't be too critical of that spirit.

Jesus' Antipathy to Legalism

Jesus never once distinguished the motive of the Pharisees from their excesses of legalism and judgmentalism, as if to congratulate the former while criticizing the latter. He appears to have made no distinction between motive and outcome and He roundly condemned their legalisms. He warned His own disciples against adopting their ways. And we still have wound up looking more like them than Him through history.

When we are painfully honest, you and I must admit that Christians often display a pharisaic tendency to place great importance on avoiding relatively trivial things. Did anyone else grow up in a church culture like mine in which dancing was forbidden — along with card-playing, going to movies and mowing grass on Sundays? Yet we never seemed to notice how racist our churches were. While we fought theological battles over financial help to widows, orphans and the poor through "the church treasury," I know of no battles that were fought over our widespread neglect of helping society's most vulnerable **by some means** rather than letting them suffer or feel dehumanized by some of the agencies to whom we abandoned our duty.

Our churches were more generally known for refusing to use musical instruments than for helping alcoholics get sober or sheltering children from abuse. More people said of churches that "They're the ones who think everybody but them are going to hell" instead of "They're the people who will treat you with dignity and kindness — the way Jesus treated people."

Why have both Jews and Christians erred in this matter of majoring in minors and minoring in majors? Can you envision

Jesus mounting the pulpit of a church and saying something like this:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (Matthew 23:23-24).

Listen to these same verses from a modern translation now:

You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You keep meticulous account books, tithing on every nickel and dime you get, but on the meat of God's Law, things like fairness and compassion and commitment — the absolute basics! — you carelessly take it or leave it. Careful bookkeeping is commendable, but the basics are required. Do you have any idea how silly you look, writing a life story that's wrong from start to finish, nitpicking over commas and semicolons? (Matthew 23:23- 24, The Message Bible).

I can envision Jesus saying the same thing to us. I've heard the words ringing in my heart now for years. And I've endeavored to echo them to others — only to sometimes be labeled as a compromiser, false teacher and heretic. But that's quite alright — I can take the criticism, because you see, I have a **revelation** of role that the Body of Christ should play in society.

Jesus is like those of us who want to run the church for those who do not yet attend. How do we include them into the family rather than exclude them? His teaching had a direct impact on Christian missionary practice when Paul advised the Corinthians to eat whatever was set before them (I Corinthians 10:27) and told the Romans "that no food is unclean in itself" (Romans 14:14). Quit judging others (14:4,10,13). Quit putting stumbling blocks in their way (14:13). Learn to live in harmony (15:5) and build up one another (14:19) rather than walls of separation.

The biggest obstacle to faith in our unbelieving time is the church. The greatest handicap God has in reaching the lost is dealing with the people He has already saved. We become

denominationally minded, turf - protective of **our** church, **our** heritage, **our** beliefs and **our** positions.

We know and understand that the church is supposed to be "distinctive," but we get confused about what makes us authentically unique. We choose the easy way of being distinctive — we enforce rules about card-playing, movies, dancing, instrumental music, weekly communion and a dozen other things. Not one of these things requires any significant **heart adjustment** in us though. So we don't dance but let children suffer abuse because of a lack of safe foster homes. We sing capella and continue to play the race card against whites or blacks or Hispanics. We eat the Lord's Supper and sow discord among members of the Body of Christ.

We've strained out a gnat and swallow a camel — a two-humped camel at that.

The Deceitful Heart

God does not always respect the boundaries we create and carefully protect - the hypocritical mask we wear. Drawing lines in the theological sand may serve our purposes; separating good guys from bad guys can be helpful, because it is hard to know that you're on the inside unless you know who is on the outside. But God has a studied disregard for anxieties of this sort. Prodigal grace keeps spilling over into alien territory.

A certain preacher I know filled a pulpit for over three years by preaching legalistic orthodoxy, defending the distinctives of the church with vigor and making a reputation for himself as a "sound gospel preacher". Much of that reputation was built on attacking others.

Then his addiction to pornography broke over his head, when his wife found him at his computer at 2:30 a.m. one Tuesday. He had dabbled with pornography since high school and the Internet had become his portal to everything he could imagine and more besides. Chat rooms. Prostitutes. Affairs with three women in his church. The externals were in perfect working order. The heart was corrupt.

"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). "Create in me a pure

heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalms 51:10).

Conclusion

In today's message, Jesus challenged not purity but legalism, not obedience to God but defensiveness of human tradition. While not saying that all tradition is bad or unhealthy, He did say the ultimate test God will apply is to our hearts. And you don't need a system or set of legalistic rules to protect your heart. You need a **relationship**. You need to be so filled with love for Him that the idea of cherishing any evil thing in your heart that would offend Him would become unthinkable to you.

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

Thought For The Day

You say you want to live for God . . . but you find yourself not acting upon that desire.

You don't DO what you SAY.

For all of us, this is the toughest struggle because we don't "feel" like trying anymore when we fail. We don't "feel" like hungering after GOD because we "feel" like a hypocrite. And some around us will recognize it - will see the discrepancy and **judge us**.

Christians are always saying, "satan is a liar." But, it is too easy to blame everything on satan instead of acknowledging that regardless of whether we fail or succeed, GOD is worthy so that is why we need to keep trying and keep hungering after God.

Somehow, we have made our spiritual life only about worldly success. A vice to make us feel better. Instead, our spiritual life **MUST** be all about GOD and His Glory! Yeah, of course, we are going to occasionally make mistakes and sometimes look like a hypocrite, but that is why we need to all the more turn to Jesus! We need to change! We must change!

We must hold our head high, not because we are good enough. It is only because GOD is working to change us. We must not be discouraged because GOD has a plan for our life. We must hope because GOD holds our future in His perfect will.