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The Heart Defiles a Man
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Dear radio friends,

There is a danger that threatens the members of the church no matter in what time in history they might live. This danger is easily summarized in one word: formalism. Formalism is mere external adherence to a certain set of doctrines, codes, and traditions prescribed by a particular church. It is a careful following after the rules and customs that a church deems necessary to live a Christian life, but it is following these prescribed practices of a church with the thought that keeping these things in themselves constitutes true faith and worship. When one is guilty of formalism, he believes that he is fulfilling what God requires of him simply by following externally what his church says.

But this is *not* true service of God. It is not pure religion and undefiled. And this is what Jesus is teaching us in the passage that we are going to be considering today. Formalism is really nothing more than Phariseism. It places emphasis on the outward

deeds of the law and says nothing about the inner disposition of the heart. And the point our Savior made was that God does not look on the outside, to see the things that we do there. Men do that, but God does not. He looks at the heart and at what is going on in there. Is there in us an awareness of sin in the inward parts? Do we know that sin is not simply in the outward deed but in the heart? Do we know, too, that true service of God is an inner act of deep love and filial fear for Him? That is the point that we are going to consider today.

And that is what faced Jesus when He was confronted by the Pharisees. They came to Jesus in an attempt to undermine His integrity as a teacher of the people. So they asked Him the question: "Why do your disciples eat without washing their hands? Evidently you do not teach them what is the tradition of the church. You're not much of a teacher. You're not a very good person if you allow your disciples to do something that is against the tradition of the elders."

When the Pharisees brought this accusation against Jesus, He was given opportunity to teach the truth that we are going to consider today: the heart is what defiles the man.

We read in Matthew 15:10, 11: "And he [that is, Jesus] called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man." Later on, His disciples came and asked Jesus about this parable that He spoke. We read in verse 15: "Then answered Peter and said unto him, Declare unto us this parable." And here was the answer that Jesus gave in verses 16-20: "Are ye also yet without understanding? Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man."

That is the instruction that Jesus gave to His dis-

ciples, and gives to the church today.

Though the Pharisees understood what Jesus was talking about and were offended by it, the disciples of Jesus did not seem to pick up the obvious meaning. And for that reason Jesus had to explain to them what He said in verse 11: "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man." He explains that to them by saying to them. "Listen. Whatever enters in at the mouth goes into the belly and is cast out into the draught," or, literally, into the drain, "but those things that proceed *out* of the mouth, come forth from the heart, and they defile a man."

In these verses we are taught that what a man puts into his mouth in order to eat cannot defile a man's heart and soul. Food cannot pollute or corrupt a person from a spiritual point of view. It does not make a man evil if he eats, say, beef, or a granola bar, or whatever. What a man eats simply goes into his belly, is digested, and is cast out into the drain. In reality, Jesus' language is much more graphic: "It is excreted into the toilet," Jesus says. "And it is taken away."

His point is well taken.

Food cannot defile the heart or the soul of a man. The only thing it can defile is our body. What, in reality, pollutes a man from a spiritual point of view is that which comes out of a man's heart or mouth—that is, that which is first of all conceived in his heart and only afterwards is expressed with his mouth. Corruption, or evil, is not physical. It is moral; it is spiritual. It never comes into the mouth from without, but is in the heart already and comes to expression *with* the mouth.

The explanation of this parable Jesus gives in the last two verses in this passage: verses 19, 20: "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders.... These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not a man."

Jesus was making direct reference to the charge that the Pharisees had leveled against Him, namely, that His disciples had eaten food without first washing their hands. This was considered, by tradition of the elders, a violation of the law. After all, one may have touched or handled, in the marketplace or somewhere, something that had been touched previously by a Gentile. This would render one's hands spiritually unclean, they said. If, then, he

touched food with unclean hands and put that food into his mouth, it would "defile" him.

Thus Jesus uses this tradition of the Pharisees to make plain that sin is a matter of the *heart* and not simply *external actions*. The "heart" here in verse 19 does not of course refer to the physical heart that beats within our breasts. The Bible, in many different places, speaks of the heart as the spiritual core or center of a man's being. In Greek and Roman thought, the heart was considered to be that out of which proceeded all thoughts, emotions, and so on. But the Bible takes it one step farther and says that the heart is the source of morality and spirituality. It is the life-source of our spiritual self. And, therefore, it is that within man that determines whether he will do good or evil. If the heart is corrupt and depraved, it will produce depraved thoughts and desires. Likewise, the opposite is true. If the heart is good it will produce good thoughts and desires. And these, in turn, will come out in our words and actions.

Jesus' point is this: the heart of a man is not defiled or polluted simply because he eats food with unwashed hands. Sin does not originate on the outside and go in. It

originates on the inside and proceeds out. That is the point of the examples that Jesus gives in verse 19. When a man murders, that murder is first of all conceived in his heart. If a man commits adultery and fornication, he is guilty first of all of the thoughts and desires in his heart. The same is true with stealing or lying, thefts, false witnesses, or blasphemies. All proceed out of the evil thoughts and the evil intents of the heart, before coming to manifestation in our lives.

Now, we could stop at this point, with the simple instruction of this parable. But to do so, I believe, would not do total justice to the point of the parable. Jesus wants us to look at our hearts not only to find sin but also to examine the motives for our total worship and service of God in this world.

You see, the Pharisees were good at what they did. They placed all the emphasis on an outward keeping of the laws and traditions of the Jews. They knew and studied God's Word in the Old Testament. All the traditions passed down to them from the fathers they could recite to you well. In modern terms, they knew the doctrines of the Scriptures and the teachings of the church. And they kept

strictly all the traditions of the church that, in their minds, followed from those doctrines. Their external lives were exemplary. No one would ever catch them eating food with unwashed hands. And, if anyone would ask them the "why" of this tradition, they probably had a pretty good answer on their tongues, too. They made long prayers in the marketplace; they wore the proper clothing; they paid tithes of mint, anise, and cummin; they visited the widows. And, negatively, they made sure that they did not walk more than a Sabbath-day's journey; that they would not converse with a Gentile; that they would eat nothing unclean; and so on. The outward life and actions of the Pharisee were, to the people, near to perfection. The Pharisee was looked upon with awe and reverence by the common people. There was no one quite so holy in their eyes as the Pharisee.

But the Pharisee, Jesus points out, had a major fault. He did not know what true worship of God was. It may have *looked* like he did. He appeared to be the most avid of worshipers of God. But all of his worship was in external rites and customs and laws. It really had nothing to do with the heart. The "why" of wor-

ship was not an issue. Just so one did what was required of him by the church—that was all that was necessary. Good deeds were external in character. If I did something externally, even though my heart, that is, my spiritual desire, was not in it, it was a good deed. And it was felt that it pleased God. My heart could be far, far from God. But so long as I lived a good, moral life, I could be assured that I was a child of God.

Evil deeds in my life—same thing. If I did something contrary to custom or tradition, even if my heart was right with God, as was the disciples', nevertheless, it would be an evil deed. Good and evil was not a matter of the heart, it was only a matter of external works.

That was the sin of the Pharisees. That was the sin that Jesus attacked in this parable. And that is the sin that threatens the church of all ages. We, today, are not exempt from this threat either. How easy it is to judge our own Christianity on the basis of our outward deeds, rather than what we see in our hearts. How easy it becomes to place the emphasis on externals and think nothing of worshipping God from the heart.

That comes to manifesta-
tion in a couple of different

ways today. First of all, it comes to manifestation in what is known as legalism. There are those in the church who insist that the best way of keeping sin out of the church and out of the lives of God's people is by passing all kinds of laws. This, in their mind, will force the people to live a holy life. So they come up with this whole system of traditions by which they really bind the lives of God's people. Nothing is left to freedom in the life of the child of God. In reality, that is Phariseism. People can walk according to all kinds of rigid laws, and their hearts are not necessarily right with God.

However, obedience to God on the one hand, and sin on the other hand, proceed out of the heart. We ought to know that. External laws cannot touch the heart. Only the preaching of Christ crucified and saved by grace touches the heart.

Now, that is the one side of the coin: legalism. The other side of the coin is that this adherence to outward traditions can result in licentiousness, that is to say, a total disregard for strict rules or for correctness. Often times licentiousness shows itself in people who refuse to strive after God in their lives. Oh, they will follow all of those

laws, and they will follow all of those little traditions, but that is all that is necessary, they think, in their lives. For the rest of their lives, they are free to go out and do what they want to do. They can live openly in sin and, so long as they have fulfilled the outward customs and traditions of the church, they need not feel guilty. After all, they think, we're doing those good external deeds that are required of us, so we can walk in the way of sin all we want and, well, the good deeds will overcome the evil deeds in our life.

Thus you have two extremes that come out of that kind of attitude. Both of these are guilty of the sin of Phariseeism: following prescribed rules but not striving to worship God from the heart. True worship of God is found in the proper attitude of the heart with God. It is the earnest attempt of that heart to be holy as God is holy. It is a heart that desires to try in every way conceivable to please God, even if there is not some rule that covers a certain area of life.

On the other hand, sin is when the heart follows the dictates of the corrupt nature within us, a nature that is always attempting to transgress the limits of God's Word. Sin is not simply a violation of a

church practice or tradition or a doctrine of Scripture in the outward deed. Sin flows out of a corrupt heart that would always seek to do what we want to do rather than what God wants us to do.

We have heard now of this dangerous threat to our own spiritual well-being as believers. Now the command of Jesus comes to us loudly and clearly in verse 10: "Hear and understand." We ought not to hear Jesus say to us, as He did to His disciples in verses 16 and 17: "Are ye also yet without understanding? Do not ye yet understand?" We are called upon to pay attention, to wake up and take note of what He says. That is the force of the word "hear" in verse 10. Open your spiritual ears, so that you do not simply hear these words spoken, without hearing them in the spiritual sense and taking note of them. Understand them, Jesus says. Understand them with a heart of faith. That is our calling as God's people in this world.

The Pharisees knew what Jesus was speaking of. They caught on before Jesus' own disciples did. And yet, they did not hear and understand what Jesus was teaching. Jesus explains why this is true of the Pharisees and why it is yet true of many today. "It is

not given unto them to know,” He says in Matthew 11:25. “It is not given unto them to know the things of the kingdom of heaven. Unto you it is given.” In other words, what Jesus is teaching in the text before us today fell on dead hearts, unbelieving hearts, when it fell on the hearts of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees unbelieving? Come on! That cannot be true. They did all kinds of good works. Certainly they could not be labeled as unbelievers. They were the leaders of the church, after all. But listen to what Jesus says of the Pharisees in verse 8 of Matthew 15: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.” The Pharisees were whitewashed sepulchers, looking good on the outside, but within, Jesus says, they were far, far from God. Their hearts were darkened in unbelief, and no matter what Jesus now told them, they would not change their ways.

That must not be true of us who hear what Jesus says to us today. We must hear *and understand*. That makes us think twice, does it not? Why do we follow the doctrines, the traditions of the church? Why are we so convinced that they are right? Do

we follow all these things because, well, we were taught to do them? Do we follow them because, well, the church says we have to follow them? Do we follow them because by following them it makes our religion easy—a religion that consists in outward actions and yet does not even touch the inner disposition of our hearts? Do we really think that mere, external conformity to the things of our churches will save us? Think again! Hear and understand.

Let the Spirit of Christ dwell in you richly. When that Spirit dwells in our hearts, He opens our eyes to the things of the kingdom of heaven and we do not look any longer at our external actions. We do not look at long prayers. We do not look to see if we have attended church faithfully or not. Even though these are requirements of us, we do not look to see if we have followed to a “t” the traditions of our churches. But we look at our hearts and we examine what is in them. Why do we perform these things? Do we do it out of a love for God and the neighbor, or simply out of custom and habit, blindly following after what men tell us we have to do, without even examining whether these outward traditions flow out of a heart that loves God and loves the neighbor?

Even those who have been given the truth of God's Word must examine themselves as to whether they do these things in their life out of custom and habit. Look deeply into your heart. What do you find lurking in the inner recesses of your own heart? Is there hatred, loathing for a brother or sister in the church? Then there is murder in us. Is there lust after another man or woman in our hearts? Then we have committed adultery there. Is there greed or covetousness for what another has? Then we have stolen. Do we think evil of another? Then we are false witnesses and out of us comes blasphemies.

What do we confess concerning ourselves? I'm a sinner. And ultimately I tell myself, "I need the cross of Jesus Christ and I need the salvation that He has earned for me there!" We need that. We may not think that we are sufficient in ourselves because we have kept well enough the deeds of the law. Christ commands us: "Hear, understand, examine yourselves! Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5). To understand that is to know what the true, humble service and worship of God is in our lives. And

only then will we come to God with a true knowledge of our need for Jesus Christ. We need Christ. We know that because we know our hearts. And we know that out of our hearts proceed evil thoughts and desires. Even our righteousnesses, the things that we might consider good, are as filthy rags, Isaiah tells us.

With that knowledge we come before God on bended knee and we look to Him for deliverance. He gives that only in the cross of Jesus Christ. By His blood alone we are redeemed from evil—from the very evil and sin that plagues our hearts and comes out at the mouth.

We look, therefore, to the cross of our Savior. We cling to Him. We find comfort and victory over our sin in Him. From the heart, true worship of God will flow, and in that way we will glorify the name of our God. Hear and understand. Then we will draw nigh unto God not only with our lips but with our hearts and souls, too.

God give us hearts that love and obey Him!