

What is it that really gets your goat? I mean, what's the kind of thing that really gets under your skin and just upsets you no matter what the circumstance? I know we've all got those buttons that can be pushed, things that we know are probably foolish but we can't help getting riled about them. But then there are those that we feel justifiably angry about. The stuff that other people do or say or things that happen to us that shouldn't and we know there's nothing wrong with being upset about this because it really shouldn't be! Whoever it is did something wrong or in the wrong way and we've got to be the one to seek justice and fix this all up now!

Right? I'm sure we have felt like that at some point, but is that accurate? It *might* be. But before we go running off to correct everyone who needs it, let's take a look at our gospel for today again and ask ourselves if we're getting upset over the right things. Because understanding that makes more of a difference than you might think. Here we have another one of those incidents between Jesus and some Pharisees over the proper application of the law of God. <read text: Mk 7:1-8, 14, 15, 21-23>.

Now before we dig into the incident too much, let's remember to set the context properly again. In the time frame we're talking about, the nation of Israel was still under the covenant of the Old Testament or as we sometimes call it, the Mosaic covenant, so-called because it was given through Moses. These laws that God gave governed many aspects of the nation's life, not just their religious expression, but all their day-to-day affairs. And in Jesus' day, the Pharisees played a key role in all this.

"Pharisee" is a dirty word in our culture, but not so at the time. A Pharisee was someone who took God's law more seriously than most. They dedicated their lives to studying it, determining its proper application and applying it in their own lives. These were the heroes of the day. They were morally upright, people you could count on to help you when you were in trouble, people who would do the right thing by God no matter the cost to themselves. And this wasn't just one group of people who called themselves this that followed Jesus around, there were people who belonged to this culture of Pharisee all over the nation.

And now, some of these Pharisees see something that's not right. God gave a lot of laws about being "clean" and "unclean", which they followed quite strictly. Of course they might encourage the average person to do likewise, but they wouldn't expect the man on the street to take it quite so seriously as they did. Jesus and his disciples, however, were a different matter altogether. This man claimed authority. He spoke with authority. He spoke about God and salvation. He was clearly setting himself up as a religious elite and teaching some under him likewise. For *him* to not insist that his students follow these rules was quite scandalous.

So these Pharisees confront Jesus. Why not, Jesus? Why do you let them just get away with breaking the laws like that? Jesus shows them their hearts, pointing to what God had said through Isaiah hundreds of years before, "**These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.**" (v6,7). You see, the laws they were upset about weren't the laws recorded in Scripture. They weren't the laws that God had given the nation through Moses. They were upset about additional laws that they and their teachers had added through the centuries since that law was first given. The disciples *weren't* disobeying God, just the rules of men tacked on to God's law.

Now, maybe the question comes up, why add rules? Wasn't God's law long and comprehensive enough? Have you *read* Deuteronomy or Leviticus? What could possess someone to put more on top of that? Well, let me give you a scenario that might help illuminate this. Let's say a wealthy person comes along and offers you \$10,000 to do a job for him. He brings you to his house, and shows you an old library room in complete disarray. He says, "Clean and organize this room for me by the end of the day, and I'll give you the money when I return if I'm satisfied."

Would that be enough for you to get started? Sure, maybe initially you'll be blinded by the dollar signs and jump right into it. But then as you go along you might have questions. How clean is clean? Organize how? What about the books that are only sort of good anymore? Do I have to dust everywhere? Wipe out the back of the shelves? What if he comes back and I haven't done enough or done it right and I lose out on the money? And what if you saw the mess was too great and realized you'd never actually finish everything that should be done that day? How do you choose what is "essential" to do to make your employer happy? Do you see how, in order to obtain the reward, you would have many questions about the *specifics* of what is required of you?

But what if this man wasn't really interested in exactly what you did, but rather on returning, just wanted to see that it was clear you worked hard and did your best in the time allotted? You see, this is the difference between God's approach and attitude to the law he gave and the general reaction of the people. God gave the law for a two-fold general purpose

to his people. First of all, to show that they couldn't possibly live up to his requirements of keeping clean or kosher or sacrifices any other stipulations he set up. It was intended, as the law does for us, to show them they were inadequate so they had no choice but to throw themselves on the mercy of God. Once they did that, and they realized that God would forgive and show mercy, the law was a guidebook of how to show God love and thanks for his forgiveness. It wasn't a checklist of things to be done and finished with, it was a means of expressing love as much and as fully as the person could manage.

But the Pharisees saw it as a checklist. They wanted to know exactly what was expected of them so they could do it and be done with it and rest content on that. So where God was vague, they created specific rules. When God commanded love, they created rules about just how much you had to do to satisfy God. You do see the lunacy of that approach, right? God gave the laws and said to follow them, and they, on their own, were just going to define exactly what they meant? Who says God's going to be happy with what you invent there? And of course, by and large, he was not.

Despite the absurdity of it though, many people became Pharisees and followed all these rules. Why? Because it made them feel good. It scratched the oldest itch in the book, the feeling inside that I need to prove how great and awesome I am, that I am in control and I can prove myself worthy. In short, I can save myself. Every day that they were able to keep the letter of their checklists to God was another day of self-satisfaction where they went to bed knowing that God had to be pretty happy with their performance that day and certainly recognized them as one of the good ones.

That system works for a time. In fact, there are many religions and even corruptions of Christianity today based on those principles because of the short-term comfort it provides. But what about the day they make a mistake? What about when the energy to keep it up runs out? What about the sheer volume of laws and the doubt of knowing if you forgot one or broke one on accident? Not only does this whole system prop itself up in the wrong direction, it is teetering very precariously on the edge of despair, and only a small push is required to send it careening down the pit. Observing the law to feel good is shallow comfort at best, covering up the real horrors within ourselves. Because no matter how well they carry this out, God is still not happy with them. It's still not enough.

Jesus drives to the point. It's not about what you do on the outside. It's about what's inside. You may look good to everyone out here, but you know the rage, the jealousy, the lust, the lies, the greed, the arrogance that all lie in your own heart just below the surface. That's the real problem. That's what God will condemn in you, not on just what escapes, but on what's bubbling within you. And as the Pharisees and anyone who's tried to live up to that command, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," have learned, no matter how you try to define and control the outward actions, the uncleanness within always leaks out into the open.

Building better laws and struggling to follow them for our comfort and confidence is treating the symptoms of our problem. We need to treat the disease, the core. And that's what the law was given for. The law needs to cut deeper than the surface. It needs to cut us open to the core, to our heart and show us who we really are from within. There we see that by nature that our heart is black and dead. So much evil is growing there and so much evil comes out from there. We could never clean that up. We could never fix that. And we could never do any real good from that source.

The law is there to cut away our pride, our self-confidence, our self-righteousness and any other hope we might have in our own abilities. The law of God is not vague; it simply is broader in scope than we could ever imagine, and certainly requires more than we are ever capable of. And so it lays our heart open for us to see honestly and say, "I have nothing good in me." Our mouths are silenced. When Jesus speaks there can be no objections anymore. We have nothing to add in our defense. We can only throw our miserable selves at his feet and say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

With our hearts open and exposed by the law, God can heal us from the inside out. Washed clean with water and word God drowns the old heart and replaces it with one clean and alive, powered by him alone. The disease is cut off from the real you; real healing has begun. Your hope is in the God who died to make you holy, not in yourself. That hope cannot fail. That hope won't change tomorrow. That hope won't be denied you if you make a mistake today. You are filled with love for God from within, and that is what comes out of you as a Christian. Not the unclean, but the clean that God has made you. Only the clean will last beyond this life, so that is the part we care for with God's word. We deny sin not because we are proven better people for doing so, but because it starves the old self. We feed daily on God's word because it keeps the clean heart alive and pouring out into our lives.

Don't get caught up in the same world the Pharisees did. The outward trappings are largely irrelevant. Worry about the heart. Open the path to your heart by letting the law cut you deep. Feed the clean heart with the Holy Spirit through the pure word of God. The outward actions will follow. A heart filled with what is clean is truly healed, and instead of just covering up the disease within, will truly pour out what is clean. We may see things in the world we want to correct or things in ourselves to fix. Start in the heart. Leave the details to God, let the outward expressions come as they may. Provide real healing from God from within and the life that lives for our God will follow. Amen.