

Part 43: What's in a Heart?

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My wife was one of the lucky ones who had some complications following her first bout of Covid. Her doctors recommended her to get a stress echocardiogram to better understand some of her heart and repertory symptoms.

For this procedure, they injected a sort of dye into my wife's heart and then took pictures of it while they had her standing and exercising. The result was that we were able to see which parts of the heart were pumping blood as they should and which ones were not.

Such a procedure took lots of technology, a whole team of medical staff, and a wonderful insurance plan to pull off. But in our text today, Jesus is going to give each of us a free echocardiogram. He's going to help us see what we might not be able to see on our own but putting our own heart under a sort of stress.

As we are working through the book of Luke, conflict is building around people's perception and understanding of Jesus as God's messiah. Last week Jesus warned us that he is the sign par excellence which we must see if we want salvation. This week the lens of conflict narrows all the more as we encounter a pivotal clash between Jesus and the religious officials of the day.

Twice, Luke has already told us that the crowds and the officials were seeking to test Jesus—they wanted to assess the true results of who Jesus was. But in this passage it is Jesus who reads the test results of the Pharisees and the scribes.

We see the context for these lab results in **Luke 11:37-39**. Already the heart of the Pharisees are already on display. One of them invites Jesus to dine with him, and even though they have been a thorn in his side, Jesus mercifully yields to his invitation. But as soon as Jesus does exactly what is asked of him by this Pharisee, the man is upset at him—astonished that Jesus didn't first wash before dinner.

Now Jesus wasn't being gross here. The debate wasn't that Jesus ate with dirty hands. You see the Pharisees were a group of ordinary Jews, who loved the Old Testament Law. Which at face value was good. Jesus himself loved the Law. But, as their name itself means, they were ones who demanded a sort of "separatism" from anything carnal or secular. On its own, this too isn't terrible as Jesus warns his own disciples of the dangers of the desires of the flesh.

But more than simply following the Law, the Pharisees did two things. First they universalized it. Meaning they looked at all the purity rituals that were required by the Levitical priests, and priests alone, and they applied that to anyone who would seek to follow God. As one commentator said they expected that, "every house was a temple, every table was an altar, and every man was a priest." Secondly, they expanded the Law. Meaning not only did they require Jesus to wash his hands to eat as if he were about to prepare a sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, but they added more extra-biblical steps, traditions and measures which were not commanded even to the priests in the Law.

It was at Jesus' lack of participation in these universalized and expanded ritual washings that the Pharisee stood aghast at. For the Pharisees, the sum of everything was total purity, unstained, set apart and distinct. But here Jesus ate like a commoner.

And Jesus, being fully God and fully man, just as he does with us today, knew the heart of the Pharisee and he spoke to all of the religious officials when he said this: **Luke 11:39-41.**

And here the scene is set for everything Jesus is about to rebuke the religious leaders for. He makes his point in terms of a parable on washing the dishes. What good is it, to scrub the outside of a cup, only to give it to someone without emptying out the rancid milk that has curdled in it for the last few days?

Jesus' point is simple: It doesn't matter how nice the outside of your life looks if your heart is dirty. He gives two reasons: 1. Because God sees it, and 2. Because others will be effected by it.

The solution comes to us in verse 41: give alms (that is to give mercifully and generously to others, but primarily the Lord) the things that are within, and behold everything is clean for you.

What does he mean when he says that? Well, it means that instead of offering Jesus the outside and external displays of our lives, we are to offer him the things that are within. The immediate context of what is "within" is clear in vs. 39: Greed and wickedness. What Jesus is therefore after is the humble offering of the sinful, broken, and messy pieces of your life. And when we offer this instead of the sparkling outside, God begins the cleansing process of the whole cup.

But before we move on, notice the tension. Jesus wants what is within, he doesn't want the superficial cleanliness of your cup. But contrary to our culture today, the goal is not simply authenticity. If you're authentically greedy and wicked, that's not a great thing. But the goal is to authentically offer the true realities of our heart the Lord and to be cleansed by his grace.

This is our main point today: **Jesus cleanses us by calling us to offer and address the issues of our hearts.**

The context of Jesus' teaching is to Pharisees. Often when we read texts addressed to Pharisees we can read it two ways. The first way reads it and agrees with all the guilty verdicts Jesus gives and are incredibly burdened by it. But notice hidden in this passage is the offer of true cleansing as well. Others of us read Pharisee texts in light of the "others" in our life. We know the Pharisees in our life and they need to hear this. But this is preserved in scripture for all of us. All of us need to think soberly about the ways in which external, human works subtly influence our view of our standing before God.

As Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and the Lawyers he structures his words almost as mirror images—identifying similar themes in each, but centering on the devastating danger of empty religion in the middle.

He's giving us a container into which we can see more clearly the gross insides of the heart which boast in its own cleanliness. Just as the singular fruit of the Spirit produces an abundance of good fruit, so too the fruit of the flesh produces an abundance of rottenness. We then are to be on guard and sincere about what this might show us about our own hearts as well.

The three postures of heart Jesus warns us of are: **Delusional Contentment, Empty Applause and Harmful Holiness.**

So to begin let's examine Jesus' warning of **Delusional Contentment.** Read with me **Luke 11:42, 52.**

What brings you contentment in your walk with Jesus? If you had to answer the question: Is God content with your walk with him and are you content with what your walk looks like? What would you say?

Now I want to preface something here, I know there are many here who would boldly stand up and say, "I'm not doing well! I have no grounds for contentment about my worship or my standing before the Lord!" Jesus is not talking to you here. He's not talking to those who are aware of where they do not measure up. Instead he's talking to those who can give a laundry list of reasons why everything is "ok."

Notice the two examples Jesus gives. First, he talks of the one who tithes mint, rue, and every herb but neglects the justice and love of God. They give of the outside, but not the inside.

The principle of a tithe is taken from the Old Testament where farmers and laborers were to give a tenth of their produce and their income to the service of the temple and the priests. But here we see again these expanded rules that the Pharisees put in place. They tithed not only off their income, but off their cupboard.

Have you heard the joke about Crossfitters? How can you discern if someone does Crossfit? You don't need to, they'll tell you. That's what we can assume here about these Pharisees. They are so concerned about the external perception of generosity and holiness that people are aware not only that they give (which I think is a biblical model of discipleship) but what they give and to what degree.

But meanwhile, though they empty the darkest corner of their pantry they neglect to give what is within: justice and the love of God.

Now notice what Jesus said to them: "these things you should have done without neglecting the former." That's important, Jesus isn't saying: "Stop being generous with your wealth, and start loving and caring with your heart." Instead he says, "Do both!"

Christianity is often a "both, and" religion. He wants external generosity, but he also wants generous living, generous worship and generous justice. For some of us it's easy to be content in what we give either financially, or even in physical service. But the generosity and affection of the heart is Jesus' ultimate concern here.

Remember the whole summary of the Law? Remember Jesus' interaction with the lawyer in **Luke 10:26-28?**

We cannot fulfill the law, we cannot be content that we have the pleasure of God if we refuse to offer to God what God says is of first importance. I just found out that the candy bar I often bought my wife as a gift isn't even her favorite candy bar. It was shocking to me when she finally shared that helpful little tidbit with me. But you know what would be more shocking? If knowing she liked something else more, I kept giving her that same gift boasting in what a good husband I am.

See also Jesus' rebuke once more in **Luke 11:52**.

What blatant delusion. Jesus is obviously talking about the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees have taken away the key of knowledge, the sign of Jonah we looked at last week, because they are telling people that this Jesus guy is just a sham.

Both of these stories illustrate a willful withholding that's rooted in a false confidence. These men are so confident they don't need Jesus they throw away the key. But more than that, they are so content without Jesus that they convince others they don't need him.

Now most of us would never dissuade someone from following Jesus with our words. But what about with our lives? If you claim to be a Christian and yet the whole of your life is based off some other key to the kingdom, do you think that might have an unintended effect on others? Do you think a life poured out for the thrill of adventure might deceive others into thinking that the Kingdom of God looks more like that and less like Jesus?

Or where do we see people eagerly pursuing pure and honest holiness, but we ourselves find that their pursuit of it makes us uncomfortable? Perhaps we tell the person who wants to read their Bible early in the morning they are legalistic, "You don't need to do that, you're fine to sleep in, it's all grace, Amigo!" Out of contentment for worldly things we might boast in who we are, what we've done, and what we know, but all such boasting is evil and it deceives others.

Beware of a contentment in your heart that finds assurance before God in anything less than offering our hearts in full to Jesus.

Next Jesus warns us of those who live for **Empty Applause**.

Read with me **Luke 11:43, 47-51**.

A heart which is unconcerned about what is within is a heart whose longing is often the praise of those who are without.

The superintendent of my school growing up used to always say, "If a thousand people say a stupid thing, it's still a stupid thing." Jesus here says, "If a thousand people applaud a stupid thing, it's still a stupid thing."

But don't we know how powerful our appearance and acceptance by man can be in our own hearts? In Lewis' Narnia series there's an absolutely abysmal king named Tisroc, but he has his people trained whenever they see or speak of him to say, "Tisroc, may he live forever." Why does he have them do that? Because it adds a false confidence. As long as people think highly of him, he must be doing well. How easy it is to live for and demand such external applause.

This is exactly what John describes in **John 12:42-43**.

If no one saw you pursuing holiness, if no one liked your Instagram post of your morning devotions, if no one commented on your church attendance, if no one complimented your selfless service, would you still do it?

Now my hope is that we would be a generous people to affirm what God affirms, but let us be a people who find our deepest affirmations not in the applause of men, but in the affirmation of God himself.

Be wary of a religion which comes to church and is seen as a church member, sings worship with full throat, takes the Lord's Supper, confesses their sin, and then goes home living a private life void of everything affirmed in public.

This leads into the second and more robust point Jesus makes on the issue. This is where he talks about people who seek applause through mere association. He talks about how these lawyers build big, elaborate tombs, many of which are still standing today, in honor of the prophets of old in the Old Testament.

But look at what Jesus says: **Luke 11:47-48**.

What's going on here? Have you heard the phrase, "Dead men tell no tales"? That's exactly what Jesus is saying here. These men are building tombs of prophets, prophets who were killed because they called people to respond to God with faith and repentance. But what they do not realize is that if those prophets were here today, they would be condemning the empty religion! How do we know this? Because they themselves are rejecting the greatest prophet, Jesus Christ.

Look at what he says next: **Luke 11:49-51**. In other words this generation who rejects not a prophet of God, but the prophet who is God, is guilty of the sum total of all the faithlessness, all the violence and all the unbelief of all the other generations added up in full. But one day, God will judge it all. Including those in this generation who reject the call of Jesus.

The irony is that these men wanted to be seen as servants of the prophets, they wanted to be seen as publicly associated with the men of old, but their association was actually an affirmation of how far they were from the prophets themselves.

I feel this may be one of the more sneaky traps in our hearts today. Specifically for those who are influenced by the theological richness and academic drift of our own church. I love reading theology, perhaps you love reading theology. But quoting John Calvin or St. Augustine is no badge of anything. I once saw a pastor wearing a shirt with the face of Charles Spurgeon on it as a sort of identifier. Meanwhile, this pastor denied the inerrancy of scripture and didn't believe in the doctrine of hell or our need to be saved from it. If Charles Spurgeon would have been alive to see it, he would have condemned that man on the spot.

You could slap a Christian fish on your car, you could buy a bumper sticker for our church (which doesn't exist), you could get my face tattooed on your calf and the Bible itself plastered on the outside of the walls of your home—but if you do not listen or live in accord with what is preached it means nothing.

It is as the prophet Isaiah says in **Isaiah 29:13**. They draw near, but they refuse to draw in authentic humility.

If the cross and the scripture are merely symbols of the Christian faith, we gain nothing. But if the cross and scripture are the substance of the Christian faith, our lives are markedly shaped by them. We expect affliction and difficulty because Jesus himself wasn't spared by it. And we also allow scripture to speak into our hearts, diagnosing us and changing us because it is alive and active even today.

This leads to the central critique and warning of false religion that Jesus gives us today: a warning against **Harmful Holiness**.

Now I want to preface this passage before we begin because many of us in here might already say, "Is there anything other than harmful holiness." The idea of being "holy," that is to be set apart like our God who himself is holy, is often a dreadful idea to us in our flesh.

Holiness and hypocrisy often go hand in hand in our modern minds. But there is nothing more beautiful than true holiness. A holy life may look like less by worldly standards, but it is more by spiritual standards. The person who lives in holiness—in obedience to Jesus by the power of the Spirit—walks in deeply intimate fellowship with Jesus who is the wellspring of all life. The older I get, the more weaknesses I find in my faith, the more desperate I am for holiness not because the alternative is judgement but because the alternative is joylessness.

God's call to us as his people "to be holy as I am holy" and this is not only for our preservation but also for our preoccupation. It's for our infinite, endless, soul-satisfying, world-rejection, life-giving, evangelism-producing, eternity-sensing, Christ-magnifying, sin-crushing, fear-smiting joy.

But to add the externals of holiness without the internal righteousness of Jesus Christ, and to hold that up to others as our standard, is to cause immense harm not only to yourselves but to everyone around you.

Just as I might affirm the joy and beauty of biblical gender roles in the church and in the home while also railing against the perverted misapplications and abuse of them, so too Jesus can lay a glorious hope in the holiness of the saints while also laying the axe at the root of harmful holiness according to the flesh.

And all who think they live as holy, and are helping others do the same ought to humbly heed the warnings of this passage: **Luke 11:44-46**.

Let us first be warned of the influence we have on others whether you realize it or not.

Jesus uses this example of unmarked graves and people unknowingly walking over them. This might seem odd to us, but it would have carried a moral weight to the listeners of the day. In Leviticus 19 the law states, that for reasons of public health and safety, if someone were to come in contact with a dead body, or a grave they would be unclean for seven days before they could rejoin God's people.

Moreover, the role of the priests was to be the clean people who sprinkled these individuals clean with water and welcomed them back into the fellowship of God's people.

Jesus' critique here is abundantly clear: You, externally minded Pharisees, are not the clean ones who help the unclean. Instead you are the unmarked grave that defiles all who unknowingly follow your lifestyle. Remember, up until this point the Pharisees were seen as the good guys. They were the ones who knew the law, they were the pillars of righteousness, but now Jesus is revealing just how far they are from actually helping the people.

When people come to them for cleansing, the Pharisees do not lead in humbly offering up the inside to the grace of God, but instead defile them by attempting to heal them with the external works of dead flesh.

Secondly, in turning to the lawyers lest they think their insult was merely accidental, Jesus highlights the damage all the more. They tie up people with burdens hard to bear and they do not even touch the burdens with one of their fingers.

Now certainly some of these burdens were faithful burdens from the law. The law does restrict sin in the flesh, it calls us to love God and to love others. But I imagine many of these burdens also stemmed from the expanding of the law that the Pharisees promoted. More laws, more rules, more weight, more requirements.

But Jesus focuses the critique on the real problem at bay here: they do nothing to help those they burden. They don't even move a finger to touch it.

To anyone who has any influence anywhere, sit in humble fear of this text. To my fellow elders, beware. To husbands and fathers, beware. To parents, beware. To community group leaders, beware. To disciplers, beware.

Beware that your holiness is biblical holiness lest it deaden the lost, extinguish the weak, and destroy the aspiring.

Consider the externals of your holiness and ask yourselves, what is this saying about the gospel? Is this a model of gospel joy? Am I pursuing this because at the bottom of it is the commandment in scripture and the abiding worship and power of grace? Or am I pursuing this because it looks holy and emphasizes my own work? Your answer to that questions means a lot.

I've met lots of women, and I've never heard one of them say they wear high heels because they are comfortable. Instead they wear them to meet the expectations of the occasion or to fit some cultural mandate that is given to them. But it's never out of affection.

The result is that there are so very few evangelists for high heels.

How many of us do not help others in their pursuit of true holiness because we look at our own false holiness and realize that there's nothing attractive into which to call others? We don't do it out of a desire to grow, or the honor of God, or the love of others, but only to look the part.

If our holiness was motivated by our worship, then we would bind up where the Bible binds up. But we would also look at those who are wrestling with true biblical weight and we would seek them, we would leave our own progress behind to find them. We would take the initiative to lift, carry, cut and disentangle these burdens with the beauty of the gospel.

Is your holiness biblical? Does it stem from a heart made new by Jesus or is it the work of the flesh to clean what is outside so that it can be seen by others? Is your holiness benevolent? Does it oppress those around you demanding from them what God himself doesn't demand? What does your holiness show others about your holy God?

Brothers and sisters, take heed of your hearts and assess the motivations of your actions.

And if you find yourself guilty of these, then do not fall back into hypocrisy! How easy is it for us to feel caught here and then turn right back to external change for the sake of comfort, change for the sake of applause, or change for the sake of more unattainable holiness.

But instead do as Jesus commanded, give what is within to God, and trust his healing touch.

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees because instead of being the ones who sprinkle cleansing water on the defiled, they add to their defilement. But Jesus is the clean one who has come to cleanse us.

Jesus has water that washes even the dirtiest, greedy and wicked heart. Offer it to him. Stop trusting in the external and start giving the true reality of your heart over to God and watch everything else slowly begin to sparkle as Jesus transforms us through the power of the Holy Spirit.