

Part 27: Blind Hearts and Clear Hopes

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The past few decades in America has highlighted a turning point in our culture. For many of you growing up there was very much a public and private distinction in your lives. What you did in private and who you really were was something that had to take a backseat to who you presented yourselves to be in public. Christian or non-Christian there was a specific set of topics which were not meant to be public. Whether that was sexuality, politics, religion or artistic expression, it was understood that those are best kept to yourself and you shouldn't let anyone know about them.

There was something about specific ideas which in public would mark you as impure, defiled, less than acceptable. Whether it was from a social circle, a religious community, or a familial identity the manifestations of these internal desires were disqualifying.

But now the pendulum has swung the other way. We realized that it is not healthy to live one way in public and another way in private. To stress outward hypocrisy over authenticity is no life at all. If we were passionate about something, we should have the freedom to be passionate about that. This is what led to the sexual revolution, the popularizing of 24/7 news networks, and the constant celebration of whatever we presently feel on social media.

At the center of all of this movement was the human heart. Our hearts should be free to feel, think, act and do what it is they want to do. The idea was a sort of liberation of the heart. In many ways it was right for culture to realize that we cannot act as if our heart is unimportant when it comes to our actions. But now we have wrongly concluded that our hearts are blameless when it comes to our actions.

Our hearts are drastically important, but they are not on their own safe. We cannot understand them. The 17th century physicist Blaise Pascal mined the depths of mathematics and physics and still was able to say: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows not."

There is nothing more central to our existence than the motivation of our hearts and yet we know how apt we are to be let down or lead astray by them. While the heart exerts a monumental amount of force in our life, we cannot assume that our hearts are safe or good.

We know this because resolve and sincerity doesn't solve everything. We can have pure affection for wrong things. Or we can have impure affection for right things. We can have right affection producing broken actions, and we can have twisted affection producing seemingly positive actions. But both of these are broken. We know that, and yet we still have to deal on a daily basis with our hearts and the reality of our actions.

Jesus knows this tension, and it's what we are going to look at today in Matthew. In today's story we are going to see Jesus interacting with the actions and the hearts of people. And I think this passage of scripture is incredibly important for us in our culture today. Because Jesus is going to largely agree with what our culture says: Our hearts matter. Our hearts matter more than our actions matter. But the point

we are going to see today is that they are not infallible. In fact we must hold the influence of our heart in tandem with the danger of our hearts.

What is going to be helpful today are three distinct scenes we will see in Matthew 15. First we are going to look at how Jesus sees the heart of the Pharisees, then we are going to see how Jesus wants us to view our own heart, and then lastly we are going to see how Jesus sees the heart of faith. And in all three of these scenes what we are going to see is this: **Jesus wants us to understand our own hearts.** He wants us to have affection, but affection in the right direction towards the right things.

As Matthew is sharing his account of Jesus' ministry he is stressing the way in which Jesus is the long awaited Messiah of the Old Testament. Specifically in this part of the story Matthew is showing us the ways in which Jesus is distinct. Last week we saw that Jesus is the greater Moses in that he is the greater salvation of God. And today we are going to see Jesus as a greater judge than the Law because he sets a greater standard of holiness.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Bible, the Law was shorthand not only for the Old Testament in general, but specifically the regulations and rules which God gave his people Israel so that they may be holy. That means that there was a set of obligations which made them distinct from the other nations around them and devoted to God.

The Law, being the capital "L" law was very important. It was God's grace and gift to his people. Jesus affirms the importance of the Law, but also the role he plays in it **in Matthew 5:17-18**. Jesus came to fulfill the law. You see the Law was good, but it was incomplete. It was a good measure of God's grace which needed to be completed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ and his perfect obedience to it.

Rules aren't bad in themselves, but what you do with rules is important. This is the important context for the first encounter we are going to see today in our text: **Matthew 15:1-2**. So here we run into again this group of called the Pharisees. The Pharisees are a powerful group of people who, though they are not officially part of the structure of the temple worship, are authority figures in that area.

These men also loved the capital "L" Law. So much so that they established two giant works of legal literature called the Mishnah and the Talmud. Because they saw the importance of the Law of God, and the severity of it, they provided thousands of little "I" laws which created a security net around the law.

These man-made laws are here called, "The Tradition of the Elders." In the Old Testament Law, God gave rules for priests to wash their hands before they fulfilled their priestly duties. However in order to protect and complete these regulations, the little "I" law provided all sorts of hand washing rules to everyone. Before you ate you had to pour a specific volume of water out of jug, but it had to be poured out of a specific part of the jug, and not the side of it. If it came over the side, still impure. You had to pour water only onto one hand at a time. If the water went onto two hands, still impure. You had to wash up to your wrist and if you didn't get up to your wrist, still impure.

So these law-loving Pharisees travel all the way to Galilee because they hear Jesus' disciples aren't washing their hands when they eat. If Jesus is a true teacher of the law, then certainly he wouldn't let his pupils violate it.

It is ironic timing that the Pharisees came up to Galilee to question Jesus on ceremonial washings and purity after Jesus had just fed 5,000 people and healed a great multitude. The possibility of the disciples

not washing their hands, and contacting the impurity of disease at this point was extremely high. The Pharisees came to expose Jesus' as a fraud, but what we are going to see is Jesus exposing their hearts as the fraud. Continue reading with me: **Matthew 15:3-6**.

In this text we are seeing how Jesus sees the heart of the Pharisees, and what it teaches us is this: **Our hearts need the word of God**. We need to see what is most important.

Jesus answers and elevates the drama of this debate. The Pharisees ask why the Disciples break the tradition of the elders, and Jesus counters with the question of "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of you tradition?" Jesus is stressing the priority of God's commandments versus the traditions of men.

And Jesus uses the example of caring for your parents. You see Jesus quotes two passages of God's Law which the Pharisees would have known well. The first quotation is straight out of the Ten Commandments, and the second portion is in a section which describes the severity of punishment for those who do not care for their parents.

The clarity of God's concern for others in the Law is so incredibly clear. So why are the Pharisees not obeying it? Because they had made their own law. The law of "korban." What this law allowed was for you to dedicate all of your riches to God as an offering. So if mom and dad need to be cared for, you simply tell them, "Sorry Pa, my money is for God."

Jesus' rebuke here reminds us of how concerned God is in the way we treat other people. Those who truly follow God will not be misers towards others, but we will be generous towards others. But in the name of holiness, the Pharisees refuse to care for those closest to them. The loophole with the korban laws was that your stuff remains your stuff until you die. Which means, you can invoke "korban" and continue to spend all you want until you die, leaving God and your parents nothing. And Jesus says to them, in attempting to keep this lower case "I" law, this man-made tradition, you have made void the very word of God.

I'm sure that if we were to have an honest conversation with anyone in our city, we would not have to watch the news long before we came to the conclusion that there is something wrong with our world. There is an aspect of impurity or defilement which poisons what humanity should be. We need to identify what that is, and make steps to distance or remove it from us.

The problem is, without the word of God may have trouble seeing what is really wrong, and even more trouble deciding what to do about what is wrong. So like the Pharisees, we will construct our own solutions and come to our own self-contradicting end. Our hearts will build laws. Laws for myself, laws for you. Laws to comfort me, laws to justify me, laws to make me satisfied. And if our actions are blind to the God's word on the matter, the result is what we saw in this text: hypocrisy towards God and hostility towards others.

In looking at their "pure" actions, these men sought to condemn the actions of Jesus. But look at Jesus' rebuke of them: **Matthew 15:7-9**. Our culture would stand up and applaud this text wouldn't they? We hate hypocrisy. We realize that actions cannot be pure and justifiable if our hearts are not. But the question is: how do you know your heart is pure? How do you know that you are not honoring with your lips but hostile in your heart?

You need God's word. It was only the word of God which brought clarity into the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and it is only the word of God which can bring clarity into our own hearts. It is all too easy for us inside of the church, just like the Pharisees to either not believe, or misunderstand what God says about our actions and our hearts. But here we see the problem in greater clarity.

The problem with the Pharisees is they sought to supplement the incompleteness of the law with their own rituals, but Jesus came to supplement the incompleteness of the law with his own righteousness.

Our hearts need to be spoken to, or they will dream up a standard of their own which will always rob God and imprison others. And it is this distrust of our heart which is most offensive to our culture. We feel justified to condemn false actions, but we don't ever want to condemn our affections.

But that's why Jesus now begins to speak to the crowds in this text. Look with me at this next scene. What does Jesus want us to know about our hearts? **Matthew 15:10-20**. How does Jesus want you to see your heart? He wants you to see **Our Hearts Need Help**.

Just like Shakespeare's Lady MacBeth, Jesus carries on the conversation of purity and says you can wash all you want, but it won't help. You can abstain from all you can. You avoid all the things you think you should not do. But the problem is that nothing from the outside defiles us.

Food into the mouth is incapable of making us impure, but the heart which comes out of the mouth...there is the problem. Our hearts condemn us. Let me share with you how foreign this is to us in our culture. I was reading a book once and the author referenced some really cranky secular philosopher who said something along the lines of "Don't follow your heart because your heart is stupid."

But I couldn't remember the quote exactly so I went to Google and I typed in "Don't follow your heart quote." And a bunch of quotes came up, and I just wanted to share with you the first three. Now remember this is a search on "Don't follow your heart quote."

Quote 1: Don't follow a trend, follow your heart. Quote 2: The cost of not following your heart, is spending the rest of your life wishing you had. Quote 3: Don't let other people choose your path for you, deep down you know the right way to go, so do the right thing and follow your heart.

Google might have just said to my request: Does not compute. Our culture does not have a category for the idea that we should not follow our heart. And I think it is that last quote exactly which shows our blindness to this idea. It says, "Deep down you know the right way to go, so do the right thing and follow your heart." It doesn't just say, "Do the right thing" as if there is an objective and external right thing, it says that following your heart is to do the right thing. In other words to not follow your heart is to experience the defilement of humanity. To not follow your heart is to be impure and once again enslaved.

But Jesus here shows us the danger of all of this: every imperfect, broken and defiling thing we encounter in our lives stems from someone's heart. Our hearts are not the solution, they are the problem. So often, just like the Pharisees we seek to eliminate imperfections and defilement in our lives by treating external things. But if what Jesus is saying is true, then the problem is not outside of us. The problem is not what is done to us (though that has a real influence on our experience). The problem is what is inside of us.

The problem of our day is not traditional religion or progressive culture. Our problem is not bigotry or biblical morality. We may affirm this, but secretly we like to pin impurity and defilement on those who are outside of us. If my husband would listen more, if my kids would obey more, then I would have a thriving walk with God. But this passage shows the hypocrisy of seeing external issues as the primary issue. Our problem is our hearts.

To think otherwise is to be blind to what is true. That's what Jesus is saying about the Pharisees. They are blind and they will end up nowhere. I'm assuming that most of us in here agree in principle to what it is Jesus is saying, even if we don't fully understand the implications of that in our own life. But there may be people in here who are offended at everything I'm saying. Three times so far in the book of Matthew we have encountered people who were offended at Jesus' teaching.

And if that is you I want to say that it is only the God who made our hearts who can make sense of our hearts. We are far too close to this situation to think clearly on it. The first example Jesus gives of our blindness is our words.

Have you spoken harshly to people? Have you ever lied to people? Have you ever softly launched a statement veiled in sarcasm but rooted in bitterness? Those show that there is something wrong with our heart. Those words don't originate on our tongue. They breed in our heart. It doesn't mean that our hearts are only capable of bitterness and hatred, but it goes to show that there is enough to justify the reality of its imperfection. Jesus starts with the simplicity of our words to show our need. But he doesn't stop there.

He moves to the big guns: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. The Law says if you do these you are defiled. And we, just like the Pharisees, can look at the lack of these in our actions and take confidence in our own righteousness, but Jesus has been setting up a new standard of righteousness.

Look at what Jesus has already said in **Matthew 5:21-22, Matthew 5:27-28**. Murder, it's inside your heart. Adultery, in your heart. It may not be outside of you yet, but it never starts there. I was listening to a Pastor talk once about a circumstance where his drunk Uncle said some vile things to him and his young brother. The Pastor's mom took the two boys away and said something to them which illustrates the point of Jesus here very clearly: "There is nothing on the tongue of a drunk which isn't on his heart when he is sober."

This is the point Jesus making and he's gracious to do it. We need God's word to make sense of our hearts. How many times have you been emotionally frustrated, confused, uncertain or burdened? Look at what the author of Hebrews says in **Hebrews 4:12-13**.

We need God's word to discern our hearts, and expose their stunning blindness so that we can receive help. You see the opposite of hypocrisy isn't authenticity, it's holiness. Our solution and our emotional freedom isn't in becoming who we really are, but in becoming who Jesus really is. That is true purity and freedom.

Jesus is the new standard of the Law who looks not at the actions of men, but at their hearts. What he shows is that we need new ones. But that is why Jesus is so important. We, and the Pharisees in this text, now know that we can attempt to fulfill the capital "L" law to perfection but it is still an incomplete

venture because it fails to change our hearts. But that's why Jesus righteousness, not our rituals are the true fulfillment of the law, the true makers of purity.

And look at what the Old Testament predicted would happen: **Ezekiel 36:24-29**. This is great news for those who feel the weight of the hearts and actions. But where does this hope manifest itself. Where do the impurities fall away by the hands of a greater cleansing? Where do the nations receive a new heart? Where does the righteousness of the law become ingrained in our hearts instead of applied to our actions?

Look at this last story in our text today. Now let's remember that in Matthew the past few weeks, and even the encounter today has highlighted the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. The people to whom all the purity laws and prophecies were given, they failed to see and believe Jesus for who he says he is.

But what this last story illustrates in closing is the new heart which Jesus looks for. What we see in this closing story is this: **The heart of faith is a heart made clean.**

Let's read from **Matthew 15:21-23**. There are some important pieces of context in this scene. The first is that Jesus has removed himself far from the Jewish regions in his day. He has now traveled North-East out of Galilee and is in undeniable Gentile territory. Gentiles were seen by Jews as unclean pagans. In fact the term most often used for them was "dogs." And while Jesus was in this region a woman came to him. Not only was this person a Gentile, but she was a woman, and it was inappropriate in that time for a woman to approach a man like this in public. And not only was she a Gentile woman, but specifically a Canaanite.

In the Old Testament the Canaanites were the biggest enemy the people of Israel had to overcome to enter the Promised Land. If there was any group of people who were particularly unclean it was the Canaanites. And lastly this Canaanite woman has come to Jesus on behalf of her demon possessed daughter. Everything in this scene is wet with defilement.

But let's continue to read this story. **Matthew 15:23-28**.

What is going on in this text? Why does Jesus deny her in essence three times before he agrees to heal her? I believe Jesus knew exactly what he was doing in this text. We know that Jesus wasn't scared or unable to heal a Gentile, because he has already done such things in Matthew chapter 8. Jesus' actions prove a point about the relationship between the Messiah and our hearts.

The woman's first plea acknowledges Jesus as the true messiah, the Lord from the line of David. Though not a Jew, she sees Jesus as the true Jewish hope. Jesus then clarifies his mission to save Israel, his people. And the woman responds not by boasting in her ethnicity, but by admitting her need for his Lordship and kneeling before him in reverent worship.

And then lastly she responds to Jesus by calling him master, and knowing that the smallest amount of grace from him is enough to change her life.

And that's exactly what Jesus wanted his disciples and us to see. His response to her highlights his point: **Matthew 15:28**.

Jesus went to Israel and they refused to believe in him. And in this scene Jesus goes to the Gentiles in all their impurity, and they see Jesus for who he really is. In this moment we see two things.

The first is that Jesus' true children are those who approach Jesus in faith. What the past few chapters have showed is the belonging ethnically to Israel is of no good if you do not believe in the God of Israel.

We do not find acceptance and purity before God because of a belonging at birth or a performance in life. We belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

And that's the second point, it is the woman's faith which makes her clean. The Pharisees thought they were clean because they were Jewish and kept the performance standards of the law. But in their self-perceived honor they were defiled because their hearts were impure.

This woman approached Jesus as an outsider to the Law of God, weak, unclean and in need. But the reality of her defilement was overcome by the purity of her faith. This is the truth of the gospel.

We are made clean because of the object of our faith. Jesus' perfection not our performance qualifies us. And in that exchange we receive healing. The Apostle John who saw this scene captures for us the significance of it in his letter: **1 John 1:9, 3:3**.

Our hope is not in our heart, but in the heart of Jesus. And it is only in God's word where we see in clarity his heart to heal those who soberly draw near. So let us desire him with a pure faith and receive the gift of a new heart and clear hope, so that we can worship God with integrity and serve others with sincerity.