

IN MY HEART

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Matthew 15: 1-20

One of the daughters of William Taft III was once asked who she was. She responded by saying that, "My great grandfather was president of the United States, my grandfather was a Senator from Ohio, my father was the Ambassador to Ireland, and I am a Brownie."

Who you are and who you think you are will make all the difference in the world. This is why Jesus faced so many questions from his listeners. "Who is this man, that he speaks with such authority?" Sometimes the question was more like, "Well, who do you think you are, Buster?" But more often it was sincere questioning by sincere people trying to figure out just who it was who was doing and saying all these extraordinary things.

You might not have noticed it, but what Jesus did and said in the New Testament lesson from the fifteenth chapter of Matthew may have been one of the most startling things that Jesus ever said!

At least we know his Jewish hearers would think it was one of the most startling. In saying what he did he did not only condemn all the Scribal and Pharisaic ceremonial religion, but he actually wiped out a large part of the Book of Leviticus. He actually cancelled all of the legalistic food laws of the Old Testament. They might continue as good guides for hygiene, but as far as any spiritual value, they were no longer considered helpful.

Now Jesus was not trying to stir up trouble, or to get attention. He will have both of these soon enough. He simply wanted to lay down a new spiritual law that what matters is NOT the state of a person's ritual observances, but the state of one's heart.

We are led to believe that the Scribes and Pharisees, and all others who heard Jesus were in a state of shock. They could hardly believe their ears. What he was saying was revolutionary, for if Jesus was correct, then their whole story of religion was wrong.

A New Testament scholar has pointed out how "religion [was identified] with the observing of rules and regulations which had to do with cleanness and uncleanness, with what a person ate, with how he washed his hands before he ate; Jesus identified religion with the state of one's heart, and said bluntly that these...regulations had nothing to do with religion."

As a matter of fact, Jesus quoted the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, when he said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matt. 15:8). Heart service was now going to replace lip service, and he even found support for this idea in the Old Testament.

For us modern Americans who often take things too literally, we must pause and think what heart service is all about. Literalism and the lack of imagination have been the downfall of many a spiritual life. Children are very literal beings, which is to say, we all

were literalists when we were younger. Remember the story of the child in vacation Bible school, who when she got home found the family Bible, put it on the floor, and then began to march and sing on top of it? Her mother was horrified! “What on earth are they teaching you in Bible school?” Then the child sang the song they had just learned that morning. “The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.” If standing on the Bible was a part of the Christian faith, then she was going to stand on the Bible, even march. She was going to take it all literally.

In the Old and New Testaments a reference to the heart is almost always NOT a literal reference to the physical heart, not to the physical organ that is even now pumping blood through our bodies. When the heart is mentioned, it is a reference to the seat of our emotions and our psychic life. To the seat of our intellect, to our personality, and yes, even to our mysterious point of contact with God. It is the center of our will and hence, the center of our moral life. When, for example, the Psalmist wrote, “My heart shall not fear” (27:3), he obviously meant his person. He will not fear. Christian faith is a faith of the heart.

If it were any other way then our faith would really be too easy. I mean it would be easy to abstain from certain foods and to wash my hands at certain times during the day. It is a lot easier to DO something than to BE something. It is much easier to obey rules than to love rulers.

Many do fairly well at keeping the Ten Commandments most of the time. That’s the easy legalism. What I have had more trouble doing is obeying Jesus’ fulfillment of them as found in Matt.5, for he reinterprets them, saying that what I think in my heart is more valid than obeying the letter of the commandment. The commandment, for example, says, “Thou shall not kill.” Jesus says anyone who is angry with another person has broken his commandment. God looks into my heart and sees the real me. Just when I thought I had it made, he suggests that I haven’t even begun.

The Christian faith is not obeying rules. It is a personal relationship with the Ruler. Being a good father or a mother is not obeying rules- like making beds, making breakfast, or coming home with presents. It is a loving relationship with your child. Being a good spouse in marriage is not obeying rules – like flowers, a dinner out, a kiss when you leave the house, or breakfast in bed (of course it doesn’t hurt). A good marriage is based on a good personal relationship with your spouse. The Christian faith is not obeying rules. It is based on a good relationship with Christ, and if you are not sure who he is, look in the Bible, or join a Bible study group. The Bible will help you to know him personally. In addition, if the Christian faith is only externals, then we are really being misled, for many people have been able to keep externals, but not the internals. This is really what a hypocrite is. Anyone to whom religion is a legal thing, anyone to whom religion means carrying out certain external rules, anyone who has the words but not the music is a hypocrite. The way we become hypocrites (and certainly we all have some of this in us) is by carrying out the correct external acts and practices but our hearts and thoughts are not committed.

The greatest danger facing Christians today is not terrorism or materialism, or any other philosophy. The greatest danger is identifying the Christian faith with rules and outward observance only. Good deeds, church-going, Bible reading, careful, generous

financial giving, regular prayer...even these do not make a person a child of God, for God looks in our hearts, and wonders why we are doing these things. You see, we can't brag to God when we are in church, for God will ask why we are there. If in our hearts there is jealousy and anger, bitterness and fear, grudges and pride, selfishness and violence, then all the outward religious observances in the world will not make us anything but hypocrites.

What matters to God is not so much HOW we act, but WHY we act; not so much what we actually do but what we wish in our heart of hearts to do. Thomas Aquinas wrote that "man sees the deed, but God sees the intention." This is both a comfort and a challenge. A comfort, for we know that when we are not understood by the world, God understands what we are trying to do. A challenge, because outward acts are not enough. We cannot be called good people simply because of what we do, for God looks at our motives. Why did we do that? Is his question to us, not just, what did we do?

Dean Thompson a pastor from Pasadena, California tells about visiting Blanche Cripple in a nursing home. "My eyes aren't very good," she confessed, "and my memory's slipping. My memory's really slipping. "We're having church here directly. Don't suppose you'd have time to go with me?" she asked the pastor.

"I allowed that nothing would please me more," wrote Dr Thompson, "as we walked slowly down the long corridor to the community room, her arm in mine. There the old time preacher announced an ol-time 19th century revival hymn. As we sang, she mentioned that I needn't bother to hold the hymn book toward her. The print was too small to see.

"I couldn't help noticing," wrote the pastor, that she easily managed all six verses, missing neither word nor note. So, while the others sang the Amen, I whispered teasingly into her ear: 'I thought you said your memory is slipping.'

"Then, with a simple and grace-filled authority, she quickly instructed me once more. 'O, those words are not written in my memory. Those words are written in my heart.'"