

“The Changing Heart of the Matter”

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Text: Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34. Matthew 5: 21 - 48

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Rules. Everywhere we go there seems to be rules for how to act, how to work, how to drive, how to raise kids, how to play games, how to worship. Rules are ubiquitous. Critics of religion often say that religion is little more than collections of rules for controlling human behavior, and the people who don't follow those rules...well, they are hypocrites. That idea is illustrated by the old joke about a little girl who was asked in church school “what is a lie?”. She answered, “A lie is an abomination to the Lord... and a very present help in time of trouble.” The rule is “don't lie” but how easily we can be tempted to do so.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus challenged the notion that religion is about rules. And did so for good reason, because the Jewish religion in his time had been turned into a religion of rules... but for very logical and (they thought) very faithful reasons. Some background. The Babylonian conquest and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple was not only a military defeat but also a spiritual one. Attempts to try to understand why this happened to the People of God brought only one answer to them: the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah was God's harsh judgment on their lack of faithfulness. For them to have any hope going forward they believed they would need to demonstrate a renewed commitment in following the Law of Moses. This shaped the future of the Jewish faith. But about 200 years before Jesus a controversy broke out about how strict people had to be following the Law. That controversy led to the emergence of a class of religious teachers known as the Pharisees. Pharisees were theologically progressive. They thought it was nigh on impossible to adhere to the letter of the Law. So the Pharisees worked very hard to develop interpretations of the 613 Old Testament commandments to provide guidance for faithfully yet practically adhering to the Law. For example, the Law said: one shall not work on the Sabbath. The Pharisees asked themselves “what counts as work? How far can you walk on the Sabbath before it becomes work? You still have to eat, so how much food preparation can you do on the Sabbath before it becomes work? If your horse falls in a pit on the Sabbath can you rescue it?” and so on. I suspect you can guess what happened. Each of the 613 Old Testament commandments were expanded dramatically by a governing body of rules that the Pharisees promoted and taught. This understanding of faith became the common Jewish understanding and practice, and it was into this world that Jesus was born.

A good portion of the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' critique of this approach to faith. Jesus' basic criticism was that their rule-based approach was taking Jewish faith in the wrong direction. It could lead to people believing “if I only follow these rules I have done enough.” It could even lead to people serving the rules rather than use the rules as a way to honour and connect with God. Jesus pointed in the opposite direction: the Old Testament commandments were to train hearts and shape human nature...ultimately to the point where one wouldn't need any commandments or rules at all! If one “loved the Lord God with all their heart...” then all else would follow. It was not a strange idea to the Jews. Their prophet Jeremiah (who lived through the Babylonian conquest) spoke of it. In our reading

from Jeremiah today we hear him declare that God would one day replace the Covenant of Moses (that is, their faith understanding rooted in commandments) with a new, dramatically different covenant: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” Jesus saw himself as the one to bring about this new relationship with God and this renewed understanding of faith. Even though the idea was scriptural for the Jews, what Jesus was promoting was in fact revolutionary. And that revolution started with the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus illustrated this shift by reminding them of some of their laws as illustrations in his sermon. He also used a great preaching hook. He began saying, “You have heard it said (here is a rule)... But I say to you (you must have a new heart)...”. What we have here is a series of sermon illustrations that were saying to his listeners, “Faith is not about serving rules. It is about having a new heart for God”. Jesus was talking about having something so core to your very being that rules become inconsequential. In essence Jesus was saying, “Express in your heart the qualities of the Kingdom of God, and you will live the good life”.

Let’s look at a few of Jesus’ sermon illustrations here. Jesus began with a ten commandment rule: “you have heard it said, you shall not murder”. That’s a rule to govern behaviour. You might still have homicidal urges, but the rule says ‘don’t act on them’. In response Jesus said that this is not adequate: deal with the anger in your heart – deal with the motivation behind the urge to hurt another. It was a call to go beyond just living a rule, to taking on a new attitude that made the rule unnecessary.

Jesus lifted up another sermon illustration, “You have heard it said, Do not commit adultery”. That rule doesn’t address sexual desire – the rule simply stops someone from acting on the desire. Again Jesus went beyond the rule, saying “if you look at a woman in order to feel yourself get excited (intent seems to be the key here), then “you’ve already committed adultery in your heart”. Don’t indulge feelings of lust. And when you don’t indulge them you won’t commit adultery.

Promise making: people in that day made pledges based on the reliability of another – “I swear by the name of God...” or “I swear by my family’s name...”. That commitment before God or through another person – that’s what gave the assurance that the promise would be kept. But Jesus said, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no”. Have the core personal integrity to make your own word your bond. Tell truths and keep promises. The next one: “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye”. That was an Old Testament rule intended to limit retribution...intended to make retribution fair. But Jesus answer here was: if you have been hurt become reconciled. The call to love means loving even your enemies! Don’t get even, forgive.

In illustration after illustration, Jesus was saying: rules are not what make faith. In fact, Jesus was saying, having a changed heart will ensure that you will keep the intentions behind all the rules. What Jesus was pointing out was one of our most persistent tendencies: which is to become focused on the ways of religion – it’s habits, trappings, ruts, rules --and that these things become our faith rather than our way to God in faith. In the Sermon on the Mount we hear that God is interested in our hearts... and as our hearts change, the ways of faith become second nature.

For example, I have heard it said “You don’t have to go to church on Sunday to be a Christian”. Perhaps true. But if we believe that God – God! – is in Heaven and that we have been improbable beneficiaries of God’s abundant grace, wouldn’t we want to be at worship? I have heard it said, “This is all I need to give to God”, of my time, my money, my energy, whatever. Perhaps true. But God wants more than segments of our lives... God wants our faith to be woven through every aspect of our lives. These two things we hear are, effectively, rules: that if we do this and so we have done all that is required. But Jesus was after something different: our hearts. For Jesus it was simple. As we find in Luke 6:45, “The good person out of the good treasure of their heart produces good.”

My wife and I have been avid fans of the TV show “The Good Place”. Much has been made about the show’s exploration of moral philosophy. What constitutes the good life? How is the best way to live? But the show also deals with the exact same issue that Jesus dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount. In the early seasons the priority for the characters was doing enough good things so one could get into the Good Place when one died. It didn’t matter why you did good things (what your motives were); it only mattered that you did good things. And in fact, the characters initially were motivated by self-interest (“If I do good I get into the Good Place”). But over time we watched the nature of the main characters change: to doing good simply for the sake of doing good. The characters came to do good as an expression of their changed hearts. As the character Chidi put it on the show, “we owe it to each other.” As I watched this storyline develop, I couldn’t help but think that Jesus would be OK with this message. It is notable that in the four gospels only once do we hear Jesus give something he called a commandment, a rule: “A new commandment I give you: that you love one another.” Love is an expression of the heart, we say, and its expression seeks to promote well-being and goodwill. And if living the life of love is at the core of our being, then all else God would have us do will follow.

That’s why Jesus talked about discipleship as being a matter of the heart. So we hear Jesus in Matthew saying things like, “the word of God is sown in your heart” (13.19), and, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6.21). How we act comes from what is in our heart (15.18). A lawyer asked Jesus, “Teacher, which is the greatest law?”. Jesus response, “You shall love the Lord your God with ALL YOUR HEART, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang ALL THE LAW” (Matt. 22.36 – 40). An attitude of the heart is the core attitude of faith, superceding all rules, governing all actions. In the Sermon on the Mount, in the Beatitudes, who gets the blessing of seeing God? Those who are pure in heart (5.8).

Last week we saw that the Beatitudes was Jesus’ teaching about how God sees the world, which is very different from how we typically see the world. His point was: if you start seeing the world as God sees it you will live differently. Then, in this part of the sermon, Jesus tells his listeners that living differently starts with a changed heart. If God has the fullness of our hearts, then the rules become superfluous. The great 5th century Christian theologian Augustine once put it this way, “Love God and do whatever you want!”. No rules! But, if you love God, what will you want to do? We will know what to do, even without the rules.