

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 2, 2018
Pentecost 15
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 4:1-9
Psalm 15
Ephesians 6:10-20
Mark 7:1-23

Today's Gospel lesson reveals Jesus in a prophetic light, as one who has the authority to interpret God's law.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah in this passage, and the words are full of irony. It is ironic (says Jesus) that, in observing the law, the Pharisees honor God by ensuring that nothing unclean passes their lips. In this, however, they have turned the law inside out, making it a matter of simply performing certain external actions.

The gift of the law, which we hear God giving to Israel in our first reading from Deuteronomy, was a wonderful, life-bestowing blessing. What Mark shows us in the Gospel lesson is that the law given to Israel is fulfilled in Jesus' gospel by showing us the law's true meaning and purpose.

The law, fulfilled in the Gospel, is meant to form our hearts, to make us pure, to enable us to live fully in the Lord's presence. The law was given that we – like the children of Israel – might live and enter into the inheritance promised to us. For the children of Israel that inheritance was the Promised Land. The inheritance promised to us is the Kingdom of God and eternal life.

The children of Israel, by their observance of the law, were meant to be an example to surrounding nations. In the same way, Jesus' coming to us means that we are to be examples of God's love and wisdom to those around us. We are to be the "first fruits" of a new humanity.

Our collect for today gets at the heart of this truth. The law of God, both as given to the children of Israel and as fulfilled in Jesus, is given in order to "graft in our hearts" the love of God's Name and to increase in us true religion. If we are to be examples to those around us, it means that we must *do* God's law, not merely *hear* God's law.

The particular example of this principle that arises in our Gospel lesson involved what was known as *Corban*. Corban was an oath you took to give something to God which prevented its use for any other purpose. For example, a son could declare his property "Corban," and in doing so the money and resources normally used to help provide for his aging parents was now pledged to God. The son was absolved of the responsibility to his parents. The sad thing about this was that his oath of Corban did not require him to actually transfer his property to the temple or to stop using it until his death!

So, by standing on this oral teaching of the elders, the man in this case could actually avoid the demands of the Fifth Commandment. The end result was that a

loophole to obedience was created. He maintained an *exterior form* of godliness, but his *heart* was not in tune with the heart of God.

It might be easy for us today to dismiss Jesus' harsh words of challenge to the Pharisees and religious leaders on the grounds that "we are not them," and we are not like them. But perhaps we should not be so hasty. In our own day and time, we are just as tempted as they were to honor God with our lips, but not our hearts.

We hear the command, "You shall have no other gods before me." And yet we are tempted to substitute any number of things for God's rightful place in our lives.

We hear the command, "You shall not murder." But we can harbor thoughts of hatred and bitterness in our hearts such that Jesus rightly speaks of us when he says, "If you harbor hatred for your brother or sister in your heart, you are a murderer."

We hear the command, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." And yet we can be tempted to repeat things or say things about another, even when we are unsure whether those things may be true or helpful."

We hear the command, "Honor the Sabbath day," but we continue to live our lives at a dizzying pace, ignoring our need for rest, solitude, and prayer.

We hear the command, “Thou shall not covet,” and yet how much of our time and energy and resources are spent trying to *be* like others, trying to *have* what they have and *do* what they do?

And the real danger in all of this is that this pollution in our hearts can continue to exist while we simultaneously maintain an exterior life of worship and obedience.

Jesus’ word of grace comes to us today in his reminder to us that our life with him involves a continual balance between our *inner dispositions* and our *outward actions*. ***And the proper order is always from the former to the latter.***

This truth is captured so well in the words sung by our cantors this morning:

*As a chalice cast of gold, burnished, bright, and brimmed with wine,
Make me, Lord, as fit to hold grace and truth and love divine.
Let my praise and worship start with the cleansing of my heart.
Save me from the soothing sin of the empty cultic deed
And the pious, babbling din of the claimed but unlived creed.
Let my actions, Lord, express what my tongue and lips profess.*

[Thomas Troeger, c. 1984]

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, Jesus is present with us. In the creatures of bread and wine he offers us grace to meet us at our point of need. The holy sacrament is given to us to fulfill the very words of this hymn sung by our cantors. So come with faith and receive his gracious touch on your lives.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.