

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 30, 2015
Pentecost 14
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus under attack and criticism by the religious leaders, who pose a question to Jesus in verse 5: “Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old customs, for they eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony?”

The “age-old” customs to which the leaders refer here is what was known as the *Tradition of the Elders*. This tradition consisted of thousands of unwritten rules which arose over time to clarify how the moral principles of the Old Testament were to be applied to everyday life. Much of this tradition was motivated by the desire to sanctify and to make holy the common things of life.

When Jesus and his disciples do not wash their hands before a meal, their violation of this tradition is tantamount to flaunting the very Law of Moses itself. So, the question to Jesus is: Who do you think you are? By what authority can you flaunt the Law like this?

Jesus responds by saying: “So, you want to talk about the Law? Let’s talk. Let’s start with the Fifth Commandment about honoring your parents.”

Some of the religious leaders here were evading their responsibility to take care of their aging and needy parents by falling back on a tradition 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.

As we know, something is not right with this picture. The gift of God’s Law, which we encounter in our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, is meant to form our *hearts*, to make us pure, to enable us to live in the Lord’s presence. The ever-present danger is that folks can take the Law and turn it inside out, making it a matter of simply performing certain external actions. In the words

of Jesus (quoting Isaiah), we invert the normal order by honoring God with our lips but abandoning him in our hearts.

It might be easy for us 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 to create loopholes to genuine obedience.

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. And I don't need to remind you that it is not just sinful things that can become idols in our lives. Any number of *good* things can also become idols, if we are not careful.

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.*** In the words of our collect today, it involves “increasing in us true religion,” and “bringing forth in us the fruit of good works.”

But perhaps nowhere is this truth more aptly captured than 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.