

Cutting to the Heart of the Matter

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Good to see you out there. Yeah, we're going to be in for a bit of a roller coaster ride this morning. So hold on to your seats while I fix this up.

I think we're all tuned up here. So I don't know if you've experienced any of this, but my mum's voice is still ringing in my ears. You can imagine the scenario. She prepared Sunday lunch and we quite often had lamb on a Sunday. Her guests were invited to take their seats around the table and then she yells out to us kids and there were four of us in the house, have you washed your hands yet? Do we have to? As usual response from us as kids. Well, no dinner until you have. And of course, being an ex-naval nurse, cleanliness in her view was next to godliness and we had no choice. Hand washing before meals was unnegotiable. I guess that's the same in all your households. So today we're looking at another meal with Jesus and it's part of this series which starts off with a hand washing incident that you've probably seen.

And we need to understand the cultural background to this to sort of get a grip on it. Hand washing before a meal in Jesus' day was not so much about for hygiene purposes to keep your hands clean and so on and not transfer germs and all that sort of thing. It was more to do with ceremonial washing.

And this was imposed by the Pharisees, these religious leaders of the day. And they built up their own rules about the law of Moses on which the Israeli law was based. And so in case guests that were arriving for a meal had inadvertently become defiled through some sort of inappropriate contact with people that were ceremonially unclean, they had to wash their hands before eating.

And it was a kind of way of ensuring that if they were ceremonially unclean, they wouldn't contaminate themselves or anybody else. So they had this hand washing ceremony.

And normally there was like a pot at the door, sometimes with a double handle. And everybody who came in just washed their hands and then they were ready to sit down.

[2 : 39] Mark explains it in Mark 7. He says, The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.

And when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups. And we'll see a bit about that as well. Pitchers and kettles. So it was a kind of belt and braces approach that was imposed as a real burden on ordinary people.

So I think we need to set the scene now of what was happening at this meal. Jesus has spent a long day, a busy day, ministering to large crowds of people who come to see his miracles and to hear this radical new teaching that he was introducing about the kingdom of heaven.

And during this, a man who was demon-possessed and mute had been healed to the astonishment of everyone, as you can imagine. But then this Pharisee approaches him and towards the end of the day, I guess, and invites him to dinner. But, you know, these Pharisees, they had an ulterior motive, and we need to understand that. They wanted to check him out.

They weren't happy with this new teaching that he was introducing. And they wanted to test his behaviour. They wanted to try and catch him out because they wanted to see how he diverted from their own codes of behaviour.

[4 : 06] And Jesus graciously accepts the invitation. Yeah, I'll come along. The other thing we need to realise here is that Jesus was a master at taking everyday events and drawing spiritual lessons from them, something that everybody could relate to in their everyday lives.

And so here we have this kind of hand-washing incident, and there's also reference to people not doing the washing up properly. Jesus uses it to explain and expose the religious teaching, the hypocrisy as he saw it as the Pharisees.

And I think there's some very important lessons for us here too. We can't just say, well, this all happened then. It doesn't apply to us. I think we're all a bit shocked, aren't we, when public figures that we all know and respect, they turn out not to be as morally outright as we expect. We all know the example of Hugh Edwards, a well-respected newsreader who covered all the main national events, the Queen's funeral and so on. And yet, behind the scenes, he was involved with child pornography. And we just can't get our heads around that. We don't like to see hypocrisy in others. And so that was the end of his career. [5 : 22] But sometimes we need to examine our own hearts and lives. We can't just point to other people. And this morning, as I've said, please bear with me. It's going to be a bit of a heart health check.

You know, a kind of spiritual ECG, if you like. So let's get on to the subject of exposing hypocrisy that Jesus was about to do. So here he arrives at the Pharisee's house. He walks straight past the ceremonial washing bowl and reclines at the table. Remember, in those days, they didn't used to sit. They would recline at the table. And you can sense the kind of knowing looks and the raised eyebrows being exchanged around the table, these Pharisees that were gathered.

And the host challenges Jesus. Well, I suppose what they were really upset about. Do you see him? He just walked past the brook. He didn't wash his hands. And the host challenges Jesus, therefore. He says, Teacher, come out noticing that you didn't actually wash your hands before eating and reclining at table. So Jesus' response was actually very immediate and it was very direct.

[6 : 36] He didn't just brush it over and forget about it. He knew what they were thinking. He knew what was going on inside them. And he uses this marvellous illustration, using an everyday example, to expose their hypocrisy.

I don't know if you've ever been invited to a student's flat. Those of you who've got teenage children, our apologies for all students that are sitting here this morning. But I don't know if you've ever been to a student's flat. We all, two of our lads, finished up at university, went to their flats. And you've been offered a cup of coffee. Oh, that's nice. Yeah, a cup of coffee. But what is it about student mugs? You accept.

The mug looks fine on the outside, doesn't it? But as you start sipping the coffee, this dark brown scum appears around the inside of the mug.

And the more you drink, the worse it gets. Yuck. So, I know I was as guilty as that when I was a student, I can tell you. Jesus uses this graphic picture in verses 39 to 41 there, if you've got your Bibles open.

[7 : 48] This is what he says, Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you're full of greed and wickedness. Nice on the outside, disgusting on the inside.

And he says, You foolish people, did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now, as for what is inside you, be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. So, on first reading, I don't know how it strikes you, it seems Jesus has been quite rude to his hosts here. But let's just consider what's really going on, and it's quite serious, really.

The Pharisees, unknowingly perhaps, had just accused the Son of God, God himself, of being somehow morally deficient in not adhering to their religious rules.

Yet, of course, God had given Moses laws about ceremonial hand washing, as you can find it in Leviticus 15.11. But this was for people who had come into contact with people with a bodily discharge, it says.

[8 : 52] And so you can understand that, you can understand the reason for the hand washing. But the Pharisees had added to God's law, and he'd taken it to a ridiculous extreme.

And Jesus could see into their hearts, and this is the key thing, he could see into their hearts. And he knew that, although they might be observing the law to some extreme, to a level beyond what most people could even begin to think about, their hearts on the inside were corrupt.

So, for example, how generous-spirited were they being towards the poor? Were they just piling on these burdens of rules and regulations? As God said to Samuel, when he was looking for someone to anoint as king, you might remember that in the Old Testament.

They were looking for a replacement king for Saul, Samuel was a priest who was given the job of looking for someone. And God said to him, he said, the Lord does not see as man sees, for man

looks at the outward appearance, and the Lord looks at the heart.

And I don't know if you noticed there in verse 39, if you take a look at it, when writing his account, Luke says this, he doesn't say Jesus, he says, then the Lord said to the Pharisee, the Lord, he points out, this is the Lord speaking, this is God himself speaking to them, making the point that this was God himself responding to this Pharisee's challenge.

[10:24] In other words, God was saying to the host and his colleagues, never mind all these outward appearances, all these rules and regulations that you're obeying, what is going on inside your hearts? What's underneath it all?

So what is in our hearts? I think, you know, saying woe on so and so, and woe on this and that and the other, we don't use that very much these days, do you?

But if you pronounce woe on someone, you're effectively saying, hey, look out, some impending disaster is coming your way, is heading down the track towards you, and if you continue down this road, that you've set your heart on, it's going to do you a lot of damage.

So it's a kind of warning, isn't it, for someone who can see the danger that you're in and pointing it out. This is what Jesus was doing here. And I'm not sure if they'd already started the meal at this point, but Jesus continues speaking to these Pharisees around the table and he pronounces these three woes on him.

And we're just going to look at them briefly in a bit of detail. The first one was this. It was all about neglecting God, justice, justice, and the love of God.

[11:40] Woe to you Pharisees, he says, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all, what's rue? I'm not quite sure what rue is. Somebody out there probably knows. Anyway, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. So here again, you can see they were taking God's laws on tithing, giving a tenth of all they had as one of God's laws to a ridiculous extreme.

And can you just imagine it? If you were trying to live up to their rules and regulations, okay, you go out into the garden, you've got lamb for Sunday lunch and you pick ten sprigs of mint for making mint sauce and you have to bring one sprig along to Bethel and give it to Keith.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? That's what they were expecting people to do. Now, we need to be clear here. Jesus wasn't saying we shouldn't give generously to God's work or tenth or whatever, whatever we were able to, but when there's no sense of justice in our hearts and we're imposing things on other people that are difficult to achieve ourselves and anybody else, we're doing perhaps our giving to pat ourselves on the back and say what great people we are for giving.

Giving more than others, perhaps. And there's no love of God in our hearts. This is totally unacceptable in God's view. There's something seriously wrong and we need a change of heart.

[13:24] And this is what, you can see, begin to see what this is about. It's about having a look inside, examining our hearts. The second one, the second woe that Jesus pronounces is on self-centredness and pride.

Woe to you Pharisees because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces. The problem here is actually is quite obvious, isn't it?

There's a tendency in all of us, I guess, to sound our own trumpets. We like the sound of our own voices. And we put others down to make ourselves look good. We might do that not in a very open way, but we just gossip about someone and just, you know, pull them down a bit so that we look good.

To always expect others to be subservient to us. And I know in business life, I've spent quite a few years in business in my time, there is a tendency to think that in order to get on, what we should do is to put others down and promote ourselves.

That's how the Pharisees were. And Jesus puts a finger right on where they were going wrong. You might remember that other parable that Jesus gave in Luke 18, where, do you remember that scene in the synagogue and there's this Pharisee standing at the front with all his gear on, saying, just telling God how wonderful he was, you know.

[14:55] I thank you, God, I'm not like other people, all these murderers and evildoers and adulterers, and certainly not like this man over here. This tax collector, the worst, lowest of the low.

And then there was this other guy who's right at the back of the synagogue, you know, who just couldn't even look up to heaven. And he just cries out and he beats on his chest and said, God, be

merciful to me, a sinner.

So who went back more justified? Back home more justified. It was the man who beat on his chest and recognised that he needed God's mercy. and not like this Pharisee who was parading himself in front of others.

In the kingdom of God and in the church, Jesus taught that the greatest among you should be like a servant, not lording it over others. Matthew 23, 11 says this, it says, the greatest among you will be your servant.

For those who exalt themselves will be humbled in God's sight. And those who humble themselves will be exalted like the poor guy at the back that was beating on his chest.

[16:07] There's a particular challenge here, I think, to us all, but maybe particularly also to those positions of responsibility, leaders of any sort, particularly in the church, how genuinely servant-hearted are we being towards each other?

It's God that sees into our hearts. He sees what our motives are. And that's what it's all about. Well, the third woe that Jesus highlights here is causing others to sin.

This is a bit more difficult to get your head around, but woe to you because you are like unmarked graves. Which people walk over without knowing it. What on earth is that all about? What was the problem here?

Well, at that time, any contact with a dead person, and this was written into their laws, would render you ceremonially unclean. You'd have to go to the priest. You'd have to go through ceremonial cleansing.

And even, that applied even to an extent to walking over a grave. So they would, to avoid this, they would paint the gravestones white. So people wouldn't wouldn't tread on them, or they'd know how to walk around them.

[17:16] But if the grave was unmarked, you could quite unknowingly walk on the grave of someone, and then you would be rendered unclean without realising it. And Jesus is saying here that the Pharisees were like unmarked graves.

What they were doing was causing people to walk around unclean. They were leading people up the garden path. They were causing others to sin by their own teaching. Making them obey all these rules and regulations that wouldn't save anybody.

In other words, their teaching was leading others astray. And that was serious because it could have eternal consequences. Now I think, quite often, we're very good at applying challenging teaching to others, aren't we?

I know I'm guilty of that sometimes. Oh, it's a pity so-and-so didn't hear that particular sermon. That was just right for them. We don't think to examine our own hearts and attitudes and look inside our own cups, if you like.

I'm not sure whether these Pharisees have finished their starters at the meal yet, but the Pharisees will certainly be getting indigestion by now, wouldn't they? But for the experts in the law, these scribes sitting around the table, it seems that suddenly the penny dropped.

[18:36] Hang on a minute, he's talking about us too. Verse 45, it says, you know, one of the experts in the law answered him, teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.

Yeah, well done for realising that. Of course, the scribes were implicated, of course they were, in what Jesus was saying because they were the ones that interpreted the Old Testament laws and devised all these additional rules to sort of up the game of everybody and try and make them step a bit higher in what they perceived to be ways of pleasing God.

And the Pharisees were those that then put it into practice and made everybody obey it. So Jesus doesn't let them off the hook, doesn't let these scribes, these legal experts, if you like, off the hook. He said, you experts in the law, woe to you because you load people down with burdens that they can hardly carry and you yourselves lift not a finger to help them. You can see the compassionate attitude of God towards those oppressed or they're under some sort of oppression.

And these scribes were just doing it and then expecting others to obey it. Making good, very good making rules. Legalists par excellence.

[19:55] They had no thought for the feeling of the people that they were supposedly shepherding. So the discussion now gets very serious.

And it's quite difficult to understand this next bit but I think it's, it does become clear as we think about it. Jesus pronounced his final judgment on all these people. The Pharisees and the scribes,

those that were pushing out this teaching.

he points out their hypocrisy. What they were doing, they were building these elaborate tombs for the ancient prophets that were sent by God in Israel's history.

When God sent these prophets to call people to repentance and to turn to God, they were put to death. And it was these, the ancestors of these Pharisees and scribes that were, that had done that.

But they were honouring these tombs and Jesus said, hang on a minute, you, it was your ancestors that actually put these people to death and here you are now honouring them. You condemn yourselves.

[21 : 01] Verse 49 says, because of this, God in his wisdom said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute. Therefore, this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world.

And he talked from Abel through to Zechariah. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. That seems a bit unjust, doesn't it? But what he was saying here, that God has sent the greatest prophet of all among them, his own son, Jesus Christ, and the apostles that will believe in him and follow him.

And he sent his son into the world and the apostles that will follow him. And because they would, these religious leaders would arrest and kill him or have him killed too, they will be held responsible for all the prophets that have been killed throughout Israel's history who were calling people to repent and turn to God for salvation.

Wow, what an accusation. But worse still, not only were they excluding themselves from receiving the truth about Jesus, recognising Jesus for who he was, the son of God, but they were also preventing others from recognising who he was and following him.

Verse 52 says, Woe to you experts in the law because you have taken away the key to knowledge, coming to know Jesus himself. You yourselves have not entered and you have hindered those who were entering.

[22 : 36] And that was the big condemnation. So we say, well how does that apply to you and me this morning? It's incredibly serious, isn't it really?

If we by our beliefs and attitudes and actions are demonstrating that we've rejected Jesus in our hearts and not only that, by our actions and by what we say and what we believe and what we do, we're preventing others from coming to Christ, perhaps our own children even or grandchildren in my case.

We will be judged for that. In our heart of hearts, do we love God? This is where we need to just look inside and examine ourselves.

Where, how much love for God is in our hearts? Do we believe in Jesus? What he did for us on the cross, are we rejecting him?

And by doing so, preventing others coming to him to be saved? Well unfortunately, I have to say, the Pharisees and the experts in the law took offence at what Jesus had been explaining to them over this meal.

[23 : 53] He was revealing to them the state of their hearts. In verse 53, when Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely. Didn't have anything to do with him.

Besieged him with questions, trying to trip him up, waiting to catch him in something he might say that they could accuse him of. And this was when they began to find ways to justify themselves and then eventually to get rid of him, to dispose of him.

The son of God. Serious, isn't it? In conclusion, I don't know about you, but I found this passage this morning very challenging. It is challenging, isn't it? And if we really do examine our hearts honestly, we know that we too have many thoughts and attitudes in our heart of hearts which are not right and may condemn us.

And if we were sat at that table, what would Jesus say to us? What would he say to you? What would he say to me? But that is why the good news of Jesus brings us, that he brings to us, is so amazing.

All we need to do is to recognise our failings like that guy in the temple. Confess our sins and put our trust in him and we'll be given eternal life.

[25 : 10] That's the big promise of the gospel of Jesus. And just in closing, I'm really encouraged by what Paul wrote to Timothy in his first letter to him.

Remember that Paul had been the most committed Pharisee. Like the Pharisees in our story. He was determined to stamp out anything to do with Jesus.

And he's teaching he thought he was pleasing God by doing that. There was this Paul. He was there at the stoning of Stephen, putting someone to death for believing in Jesus. So persecuting Jesus' followers and having them executed, bringing them to Jerusalem to be tried on trumped up charges and then put to death.

death. Yet Jesus mercifully met him on the road, even this Pharisee. By turning his life around, changing his heart, on the road to Damascus, he became perhaps the greatest Christian leader and evangelist that ever walked this earth.

That's what God can do. It's amazing, isn't it? This is what Paul himself says as he writes to his son in the faith, really, Timothy.

[26 : 31] Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor, a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. And this is a great line here.

The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly on that road to Damascus, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

That's what we want. We want God's grace to be poured out on us abundantly. So if you've been challenged at all by what you've heard this morning or you've looked into your heart and others, that's wrong, this is wrong, I need to put it right.

God can pour his grace into your life abundantly. Just turn to him, put your faith and trust in him.

And as many of us here this morning can say that if you turn to him he will not turn you away and he'll fill your life with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus and be accepted by God the Father.

And this is what he says in closing, here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst, of whom I am the worst.

[27 : 41] There's an arousal there. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me the worst of sinners Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example of those who will believe in him and receive eternal life.

What he's effectively saying here, look I'm a Pharisee of the Pharisees, I'm the worst of sinners but if I can be saved so can anyone. He's an example to us all of the extent of God's grace.

We just need to turn to him. So there's always hope and that's what I want to finish on. There's always hope. There's no one that can step outside of the range of the grace of God if we will just humble ourselves before him and ask for forgiveness and then he'll fill our lives with the love of God and that's why we would then serve and do the things that we do not to obey a set of rules but to do it because we love God because he first loved us.

So there's hope for us all and I think I just want to say at the end here I was delighted to hear that Dave and Paul are starting a course this week on Hope Explored. So if you've been challenged by this and perhaps one or two people online would like to know more about it where is this hope and where does it come from just sign up for this course four weeks I think it is Dave and Paul are starting.

It's all about having hope hope for the future and hope of eternal life. Thanks for listening.