

Jesus and the Heart

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[0 : 0 0] Jesus and the heart. Jesus and the heart. At one and the same time, listening to the words of Jesus bring great comfort and great discomfort. He alone can speak into our hearts, but likewise, he alone can speak about our hearts. He sees behind who we pretend to be. He sees us as we really are, all our hidden thoughts and anxieties, all our hidden fears and sins. He saw through the Pharisees who pretended devotion to God, but a devotion that went only skin deep.

He saw their hearts were greedy for money, status, and power. When Jesus looks into our hearts today, what does he see? Pride or humility? Greed or generosity?

A desire to be served or a desire to serve? A desire to get or a desire to give? Love or lust?

Faith or falling? Well, in these verses, Jesus, having told a parable about a dishonest manager and applied it with convicting wisdom and insight, is ridiculed by the Pharisees. They sneer at Jesus and his teaching. They scoff and mock him. How dare this rabbi called Jesus from Nazareth in the north lecture them about where their loyalties lie? Doesn't he know that they've devoted their whole lives to the religion of Israel? They laugh at him. To them, he's a joke and a rather unpleasant one at that, because if truth be told, sometimes his words are just too close to the bone. You see, the Pharisees had a dirty secret. They were lovers of money. For all their religious devotion, they loved money more than they loved God. Perhaps what Jesus had just said about how you cannot serve both God and money went too deep. And they responded with the cheap bravado of ridicule. Well, our passage today can be divided into three sections, in each of which Jesus again is penetrating deep into our motives, desires, and attitudes, our thoughts, our emotions, our sins. First, God and the heart in verses 14 and 15.

Secondly, law and the heart, verses 16 and 17. And third, marriage and the heart, verse 18. When God looks into your heart today, when God sees what we hide there, what does He see?

[3 : 1 2] And how will we respond to His penetrating gaze? With ridicule or with repentance? With pride or with humility? Perhaps the ideal response is modeled by King David in Psalm 139 when he prays, Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me.

Lead me in the way everlasting. First of all then, from verse 14 to 15, God and the heart. God and the heart. Now, Jesus knew the character of these Pharisees and why they were ridiculing Him. He knew that they were lovers of money and so couldn't accept what He just challenged them about. So, He said to them, You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts, for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. You see, the Pharisees had an all-too-human way of thinking.

They loved money, and they viewed their prosperity as a mark of God's blessing. They looked down on the poor and viewed their poverty as a mark of God's curse.

How strangely contemporary that is, given that the health and wealth prosperity teaching of much that passes for Christian TV evangelism today says the same thing. The better a Christian you are, the more God will bless you with health and with wealth. Think about where this leads.

You can judge how good my relationship with God is by checking my bank balance or my blood pressure stats. If I'm dressed in Gucci, God must be uber happy with me. If I'm driving around in a Porsche, I must be a righteous person. You can judge how good my relationship with God is by checking what I look like on the outside. That's why Jesus can say to the Pharisees, you are those who justify yourselves before men, because that's all the Pharisees are interested in. Not their relationship to God, but how good they look to others. As long as they look the part of religious leaders, people will respect and honor them. You see, to them, externals matter more than anything else. Looking good is all that is.

[5 : 58] Ah, but Jesus tells it as it is in verse 15, God knows your hearts. He sees that what drives them is their love of money and their fascination with outward appearance.

God doesn't need an MRI to see what's going on inside, because to Him, their thoughts and motives are as plain as day. We can hide our hearts from each other, but we cannot hide them from God.

Should the Pharisees not have known what God said to the prophet Samuel? Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. How does that make us feel today?

That we cannot hide who we really are from God. We can pretend religious devotion and impress others, and we will look good to them. We can play the Pharisee, and everyone around us will loudly applaud, but no matter how hard we try, we cannot hide our inner thoughts and motives from God. He knows, even if others don't know. He knows our dirty little secrets, the skeletons hidden in our cupboards, because His primary interest is not in our outward appearance, but in the state of our hearts before Him.

Well, Jesus proceeds to turn the value systems of the Pharisees upside down. What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. You know, what serves to impress other people makes God sick.

[7 : 43] It is detestable to Him. Others might be impressed by our religious appearance, and by what seems to be God's blessing on our bodies and our bank balances, but God, who sees our hearts, is disgusted by the sham, hypocrisy, and arrogance of it all.

But you say, how can God be disgusted with people who devote their whole lives to religion?

And Jesus replies, He is disgusted by people who devote their whole lives to the religion of self, the religion of external appearances and personal gain. God condemns outward religion when in Isaiah 29, verse 13, he says, these people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

In light of this, should we not make it our first priority to find out what pleases God? We know what pleases others, namely to appear to be a success and to look the part of the religious devotee. But does this please God? I'm led to believe that in Lark Hall in South Lanarkshire, the colour green is taboo. Even the local Subway sandwich shop is painted black and white, not green and white. If you're doing market research in Lark Hall, with a view to introducing a new variety of semi-skimmed milk, you might be better marketing it with an orange label, not a green one. You need to know what pleases your target audience.

Is your target audience the opinions of other people, or is it the opinion of God? All that the Pharisees were interested in were the opinions of others. So their devotion went only skin deep. For Jesus and his disciples, God's opinion of us comes first. So they're interested primarily in the devotion of the heart. And we're left with this most uncomfortable of questions.

[10 : 23] Is mine only a religion of externals? As long as I'm seen to do religious things, does it really matter what I'm like on the inside? To God, many of the things that we do to impress others are disgusting. To him, it's the devotion of our hearts which is of primary importance.

Is the heart of my devotion, the devotion of my heart to him? Is he more important to me than money, or appearance, or anything else? God and the heart.

Second, from verse 16 through 17, law and the heart. Law and the heart. The law to which Jesus refers, properly speaking, is the whole Old Testament. He describes it as the law and the prophets. It is the entire teaching of the Old Testament concerning what we are to believe concerning God and what duties God requires of us. Now, on paper, the Pharisees were big on this.

If you'd put a Pharisee on mastermind in front of Magnus Magnuson and asked him to choose a specialized subject, he'd say the law and the prophets. But of course, what he was thinking about wasn't just the Old Testament law. He was thinking about all the laws of the rabbis also who went before.

Now, these weren't laws given by God in the Old Testament, but thousands of man-made laws which they had added over the years. For example, there were hundreds of laws determining what one could and could not do on the Sabbath about how one may wash before a meal and what kind of clothes one must wear. And in some ways, you know, these thousands of man-made laws made the law harder to keep because it's so much easier to fall foul of the law by breaking just one small element of them.

[12 : 33] But you know, in most ways, these thousands of man-made laws made the law easier to keep because they all related to external acts of obedience. As long as you kept them on the outside, as long as you didn't carry a pencil in your palm on a Sunday, as long as it was in the back of your hand, as long as you kept these rabbinic laws, you were righteous. But as you read through the Old Testament, you were repeatedly struck by how God's intention was for the law to be kept first in the heart and then only on the outside. But the Pharisees had reversed the order and in fact had entirely minimized the importance of the heart. Their view of the law dominated the Israel of Jesus' day, a law that no longer spoke to the heart but was all about one's external appearance and conformity to a set of man-made religious rules. So a reset was needed. And as Jesus says in verse 16, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached. This refers, of course, to his ministry, where his constant theme has been the importance of a person's heart before God. The kingdom of God is the rule of

God in all of life, not just in what a person appears to be on the outside, but in who they really are on the inside. Jesus here is resetting the original intention of the law, which was not to regulate a person's outward behavior, but to determine the character of a person's heart. And the kingdom of God to which he's referring was not a man-made set of rules passed down among religious Jews, but a kingdom of the heart where the spiritual teaching of the Old Testament comes to the fore. For example, think of King David's immortal words in Psalm 51, 16 and 17.

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I give it. You'll not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

The message of the kingdom of God is one of the primacy of the heart in a person's religion. The people of Jesus' day, well, they saw through the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and so they were forcing their way into the kingdom. They were earnest and sincere in recognizing that what comes first in one's relationship to God must be the heart. And so they were abandoning the Pharisees and joining Jesus instead. So again, I say, the original intent of the law was to determine the character of a person's heart, not to regulate their outward behavior. And that intent was restored in Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, and it's not going to change. As Jesus says in verse 17, it's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void. It's not that the law was ever bad. It was the purpose for which the Pharisees used it to regulate the behavior of other people.

Let's go back to the Pharisees for a second and how they're described. They are lovers of money. The law condemns them on two counts. First, they break the tenth commandment, you shall not covet.

[16 : 25] They yearned to possess things that belonged to others, namely their money. They envied those who were richer than they were, and rather than being satisfied with what God had given them, they wanted more, and they didn't care how they got it. They broke the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me, because they put their money before God.

They thought that because on the outside they looked like they kept all the laws of the rabbis, they were keeping the law of God. But what they had willfully neglected was the internality, the internalness of the law, of how it was primarily designed to determine the character of a person's heart, not to regulate that outward behavior. And it's that internal, inside working of the Old Testament law which was of primary importance to Jesus, and that internal work of the law which shall never pass away. Now, of course, it is inevitable that if the law of God comes first in our hearts, we will express it in outward actions. If we love others from the heart, we will express that love in practical ways to others. But it's the internal work of the law in the heart that must come first.

And this is where the Christian gospel comes into its own, because by nature, none of us are capable of keeping the law in our hearts. We have sinful hearts, all of us, and our natural inclination is toward selfishness, not selflessness, pride, not humility, self-dependence, not faith.

But when a person believes in Jesus, the Holy Spirit creates in us a clean heart and gives us new attitudes and affections. No longer do we want to live for ourselves. We want to live for God and for others. No longer do we want to hold others at arm's length. We want to embrace them as a family.

So it's faith and faith in Jesus alone which allows us to obey the law from the heart, to obey the way God wants us to. It is faith in Jesus that breaks our hearts and turns them away from themselves toward God. That's the reset the gospel of Jesus Christ offers today. Without that heart faith in Jesus Christ, all our works of righteousness are as filthy rags to God. It is impossible to please God by keeping the law unless our hearts are first right with Him through faith in Jesus.

[19 : 30] But if we have faith in Jesus, His perfect keeping of the law becomes ours by His divine gift. Our faith, no matter how small and weak, means that no matter how feeble our attempts to love God and love our neighbor which is the summary of the law, God takes delight in our obedience to Him.

So the uncomfortable truth of verses 16 and 17 is that none of us by nature can keep the law perfectly. The comfortable truth is that all of us this morning are invited to believe in Jesus, to be given new hearts with new desires, when obedience to the law is not a duty as much as it's a delight.

So the question he's asking us this morning is this, are you willing to believe in Jesus? Because then and only then can you keep the law from the heart.

Law in the heart. Well, thirdly, in verse 18, marriage in the heart, marriage in the heart. Now, one might wonder, what have instructions about marriage and divorce got to do with law in the heart?

Jesus is using the example of marriage and divorce to challenge the Pharisees about their relationship to the law. The intention of the law was that a husband and wife were to be married for life.

[21 : 04] They're joined as one in marriage and nothing should separate them, albeit on the basis of adultery. The law of Moses allowed for divorce. But over the centuries, to get around the strictness of the law regarding marriage, Jewish rabbis composed many trivial conditions upon which a husband could divorce his wife.

A Pharisee of Jesus' day, for example, could legally divorce his wife for burning his dinner. Yes, Annette. Worse still, he could divorce his wife if he no longer found her attractive and had found a younger model.

The Pharisees, you see, had taken the Old Testament law, the intention of which was to keep a couple together, and they twisted it for their own advantage. Now they're using the law to justify splitting a couple apart.

It's obvious that in the case of marriage, the law of God is not in the heart of the Pharisees. They had no intention of keeping the law of God from the heart.

They found ways to break the law, not to keep it. Jesus is using this example of marriage and divorce to show how the Pharisees' obedience was merely external, and that the law was not written into their hearts.

[22 : 26] Now we know that there are very difficult situations in marriage, and that there are many, many gray areas, and it's never our place to judge.

But for the Christian man, marriage isn't merely a matter of loving one's wife from the heart. Oh, he must. Or he shouldn't be marrying her. He must be utterly committed to her for life.

But more than that, marriage is a matter of loving God from the heart. If that man loves God from the heart, then obedience to God will be an even more powerful motive to be committed to his wife than even his love for her.

If that Christian man is thinking about separating from his wife on the basis that he's found a younger model, he needs to fall back on his love for God if he is obeying God from the heart, then he'll focus on recommitting himself to his marriage and rebuilding his love for her.

Nearly 500 years ago, the reformer, John Calvin, gained prominence for his preaching and leadership of the church in Geneva. Back in days like those, every family had a family motto.

[23 : 51] And he had one. He chose as his a Latin phrase. *Cor meum tibi offero, domine, prompte et sincere.* My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.

My heart I offer to you, promptly and sincerely. And on his crest, there's a picture of a heart. For all of John Calvin's intellectual and theological brilliance, he was never greater than this.

Then when he recognized that the heart of his religion was the religion of his heart. The heart of his religion was the religion of his heart.

Without that heart of faith in the Lord Jesus, all his theology and all his leadership and all his preaching were worth absolutely nothing. As we close, I want to go back to the very beginning.

Because at one and the same time, listening to the words of Jesus brings great comfort and great discomfort. He alone can speak into our hearts, but likewise, he alone can speak about our hearts. He sees behind who we pretend to be.

[25 : 03] He sees who we really are on the inside. When God looks at my heart this morning, what does he see? I dread to think. Does he see the love of money, status, comfort, pleasure, reputation?

Or does he see faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? It could be faith, you know, as small as a grain of mustard seed, but it's there.

It's there. The heart of a man's religion, the heart of a woman's religion, is the religion of their heart. May I suggest that those of us who call ourselves Calvinists, as we do, adopt the motto of John Calvin.

My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely. I think I think I think I think