

Religion and Faith

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we open your word today, help us to hear and really understand what you're going to say to us.

And we pray that as we do listen to your word, that you will transform us right in our seats. In Jesus' name. Amen. So when I was growing up, I used to love playing golf.

And having grown up watching Tiger Woods, I wanted to be the next Tiger Woods. I actually wanted to be like him in every way. And actually, there was a whole raft of golfers, young and old, that wanted to be just like Tiger Woods.

But there was only really one problem to that. We all lacked the talent. There was no chance. Anyway, we used to have this term to describe certain golfers.

And that term was, all gear, no idea. All gear, no idea. These were people that would have the best golf gear, but they would have absolutely no idea how to play.

[1 : 04] They would go out and buy all the latest and greatest golf equipment, the best golf clubs, the best golf bags, golf balls, even the best golf clothing. They would look like professional golfers.

But actually, these people had absolutely no idea how to play golf, and they were terrible at it. And that is similar to what we're going to see in our passage today.

We're going to see people who, from the outside, looked like they had it all together. But in reality, that couldn't be further from the truth. How they represented themselves on the outside was very different to what was on the inside.

And as we look at today's text, Jesus is going to show us that, whilst on the outside, religion may look very neat, it cannot make us right with God. And in particular, we're going to see three things today.

We're going to see the hypocrisy of the religious, the problem of the heart, and the solution of faith. So firstly, let's look at the hypocrisy of the religious.

[2 : 04] We saw last week that Jesus was doing some incredible miracles, which would show that he was the true Messiah. He was the true king. And we saw that he fed 5,000 people.

He walked on water. And today, we see him healing in the region of Gennesaret. And at this stage, Jesus' reputation is growing. And the scribes and Pharisees, they presumably catch wind of this. And now these scribes and Pharisees were people whose very job it was to study the law and to teach the law. We're dealing here with some very highly respected people of the community because of the knowledge that they had and their dedication to the law.

So these are supposedly the good. They're the religious guys. So in verse 1, these scribes and Pharisees come all the way from Jerusalem to Gennesaret to come and see what Jesus was doing. And this is actually a long way. It's about 143 kilometers in distance, you know, according to Google Maps. And it would probably take about 30 hours to walk nonstop.

[3 : 06] Okay. So they've come all this way. And guess what they want to know about Jesus? Do they want to know if he really is the Messiah, the promised king? Do they want to witness all these amazing miracles that he's done so far?

No. They want to see if he's washed his hands. Already we see that these religious people are kind of missing the point here, aren't they? And they have a go at Jesus for this very thing.

In verse 2, the Pharisees asked Jesus, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat. See, for the Pharisees, this was not a simple question of soap and water for hygiene purposes, but it was actually a matter of being clean before God, being acceptable to God through having clean hands.

That's why they care so much. And notice that they actually call it the tradition of the elders here. So Jesus shoots right back at them in verse 3. Jesus replied, Why do you break the commandment of

God for the sake of your tradition?

You see, they have it back to front here, don't they? The requirement to wash their hands wasn't a command of God from the Old Testament. It was actually something made up by man.

[4 : 18] Clearly the Pharisees have their priorities mixed up here, don't they? They are more concerned with keeping their human traditions than really obeying the Word of God. Jesus then uses an illustration to show how they break God's commands to keep their tradition.

And you'll see that verse 4 starts with the word for or because. So let's look on from verse 4. For God said, Honour your father and mother, and whoever curses their father or mother is to be put to death.

But you say, if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is devoted to God, they are not to honour their father or mother with it. In other words, if you decide to give some money to God, but then you find out that your parents actually need some financial support, well, bad luck, Mum and Dad.

The Pharisees' tradition said you cannot help your parents because you've already devoted that money to God. So the point is here that God's command to honour your parents was actually overridden by religious tradition.

And in verse 6, Jesus says, Thus, you nullify or break God's Word for the sake of your tradition. So Jesus just calls it exactly what it is.

[5 : 33] It's hypocrisy. They claim to be honouring God with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are but merely human rules.

And this is the hypocrisy. That on the outside, they seem to be worshipping God and doing all this ceremonial stuff like washing their hands. But on the inside, their hearts were far from God.

You see that the heart of the problem is the human heart. They love their traditions more than God's Word. And their parents, I guess. I mean, the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbour.

But the Pharisees loved their traditions more. And so whether they realised it or not, their hearts had actually drifted far from God. And this is the difficult thing.

The hypocrisy of the religious is very hard to diagnose. And it is especially hard to diagnose in our own lives. You know, many of us are involved in some great things. You know, we go to church, we serve in different ministries, we do many things for the community around us.

[6 : 40] And these are fantastic things. But unfortunately, these things can sometimes mask the real condition of our hearts. And as Jesus says here, the heart matters.

But there's a problem which brings us to point to the problem of the heart. And what we will see here is that the problem of the heart is not just the religious person's problem, but this is everyone's problem.

In verses 10 and 11, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.

Here, Jesus calls the crowds to them and speaks to them in a parable. Jesus asked the crowd in verse 10 to hear and understand. And you remember from a few weeks ago that when Jesus calls for us to hear and understand, he means that there's actually an underlying truth for us to understand and to apply in our lives.

And this truth is that being right and acceptable to God is an issue of the heart, not an issue of washing. And not surprisingly, this doesn't go down well, does it?

[7 : 52] See, the Pharisees are not happy here. Jesus has exposed them, the people that were supposedly the good religious guys, the most morally upstanding individuals in society. Look at verses 12 to 14.

Then the disciples came to him and asked, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this? Well, he replied, Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.

Leave them. They are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. So the Pharisees, they're not happy at all. This is one thing that you'll notice about these religious people is that they actually don't seek understanding.

They are not willing to listen to Jesus and acknowledge the truth of what he's actually saying. Instead, we see here that they take offense at the truth and they persist in their religious practices.

But Jesus is, he's not too concerned by this. He's not too concerned that they don't like him. He calls them blind guides in verse 14. And the crazy thing, right, the crazy thing is that even though these are the Jews, God's chosen people on the outside, Jesus says that they're actually not one of God's people on the inside.

[9 : 08] Jesus says that my father didn't even plant them in verse 13. Because of their hard hearts, they are not really God's people. Instead, they will be rejected by God.

So it's obvious that the Pharisees don't get it. But what's also interesting is that the disciples don't seem to get it either. They too ask for, well, they ask for an explanation. They had walked with Jesus, they had seen his teaching, they'd seen his life, they'd seen his miracles, and they still don't get, they still don't understand and apply what Jesus is saying.

So Jesus explains in verses 17 to 20. Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?

But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

These are what defile a person. But eating with unwashed hands does not defile them. What really makes us unclean and undefiled, what really makes us unacceptable before God is not unclean hands, but it is an unclean and sinful heart.

[10 : 24] And all of our evil thoughts, all the murder, adultery, and brokenness that we see in our world today can be traced back to the condition of the human heart. Take, for instance, the Arab and Israeli conflict over the Holy Land of Jerusalem.

See, on the one hand, the Jews believe that God will rebuild his temple in Jerusalem. But on the other hand, the Muslims believe that actually Muhammad ascended into heaven from Mount Moriah in Jerusalem.

So both of them think that Jerusalem is their holy land. And the roots of this conflict can be traced back to the late 19th century. Then there was a full-scale war in 1948.

And tensions continue to this day. But what's the real issue here? Is the real problem about who's right? About whose land this really is?

And will this conflict even be resolved by finding out who's right? Of course not. Because the problem here has never been about geography. But the real problem is the problem of the heart.

[11 : 28] And this conflict will continue because all human hearts are unclean. And this includes all of us too. No exceptions. All of our hearts are by nature against God.

And this is the origin of all our evil thoughts and sinful desires too. Let me ask you guys a question. Would any of you be comfortable if we could look inside your head and read all of your thoughts for just one day?

Who would be comfortable with that? Every thought that you had for one day? I know if someone could read all my thoughts for one day I'd probably run away from them and I'd never come back and I'd avoid them for the rest of my life.

See no matter who we are we know deep down that there's something wrong with the state of our hearts and our thoughts are so reflective of this truth. And Jesus is making it clear that the heart of the problem is the human heart which is defiled and sinful and that is really what makes us unacceptable to God.

All right so where to from here? We've seen the hypocrisy of the religious we've seen how no one is immune from the problem of the heart. So what is the solution?

[12 : 42] What is the fix to our predicament? Well we then see that Jesus leaves the region of Gennesaret and he's travelling further north now to the region of Tyre and Sidon and actually he's now in Gentile territory he's in non-Jewish territory and as he gets there a woman comes crying out to Jesus and she's actually a Gentile woman from that region and as a Gentile or a non-Jew she is the definition of an unclean person according to the Jews.

See Gentiles back then were not part of God's people so she was not acceptable to God by Jewish standards. She is by birth unclean and unworthy to be associated with God.

And we see this type of sentiment expressed in places like John chapter 18 where the Jewish leaders wouldn't even enter the house of a Roman governor because even being with a non-Jew would make them ceremonially unclean before the Passover.

But notice also that this woman is described here as a Canaanite in verse 22. Now this word Canaanite is actually very interesting. It's actually the only time the word Canaanite is used in the New Testament.

And you might remember that the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan as their promised land back in the Old Testament. And God actually used Israel to judge the Canaanites. And ever since then these Canaanites were enemies of Israel.

[14:05] So this woman is really unacceptable to God. Not only is she a Gentile but she's an enemy of Israel. But look at how she addresses Jesus in verse 22.

A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out Lord son of David have mercy on me. My daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly.

Notice two things. First she calls Jesus son of David which means the Christ. And she's actually calling Jesus the Messiah here. God's anointed king promised back in the Old Testament.

And the Pharisees these experts in the law who no doubt heard of Jesus' miracles the Pharisees don't recognize Jesus as the king. But this Canaanite woman who no doubt heard of Jesus' miracles as well does recognize Jesus as the true king.

The promised saviour of God's people. Secondly we see that she cries out for mercy here. See where the Pharisees approached Jesus from a position of authority over him the woman approaches Jesus from a position of humility under him.

[15:13] This woman knows doesn't she that she's unacceptable before God and so begs him for mercy. And so when Jesus hears this he must know that she has faith in who he really is.

But Jesus' reaction is actually quite odd in response isn't it? Let's have a look at verses 23 to 26. Jesus didn't answer her a word so his disciples came to him and urged him send her away for she keeps crying out after us.

He answered I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman came and knelt before him Lord help me she said he replied it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.

Notice Jesus' three reactions here. Firstly he ignores her then he says that he's only come to the lost sheep of Israel not the Gentiles and thirdly he basically just calls her a dog.

Now this word dog was actually a common derogatory term that the Jews used to refer to Gentiles at that time it was a way of communicating that these Gentiles were unclean and unacceptable and you know some commentators try and make Jesus sound a little less harsh here by saying oh you know this word actually means little dog so it's kind of cute it's kind of adorable but you know what I don't buy that seems like a little bit of a weak excuse doesn't it because even if I call you a little dog doesn't really seem to soften the blow that much big dog or little dog you're still a dog so why does Jesus do this well two reasons firstly Jesus says that his mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel at this time because we know that by the end of the gospel Jesus is sending us to make disciples of all nations but at the moment Jesus had come first for the Jews God's privileged people her time had not yet come and yet we see

[17:19] Jesus traveling north to this region this gentile region of Tyre and Sidon which shows that yes he did come to save the gentiles not just the Jews in fact we see that in the next scene he's healing and he's feeding these gentiles in verses 29 to 39 and so the second reason he seems to resist her plea here is actually to highlight her faith just think about it if he heals her daughter as soon as she calls him the son of David sure that would be faith but we wouldn't just see just how much faith she has compared to the Pharisees so I wonder here if Jesus is using a common but harsh answer which really pushes her in a way which shows how great her faith is and we see that in her response it's amazing because if someone calls you a dog you should probably leave shouldn't you you probably get a sense that you're not going to get what you asked for you're not going to receive anything if someone calls you a dog but look at her reply in verses 27 and 28 yes

Lord she said even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table then Jesus said to her woman you have great faith your request moment amazingly here this woman continues with the metaphor she actually accepts the title of a dog and in doing so she's acknowledging the fact that she is unclean she doesn't take a fence or walk away like the Pharisees did no this woman's faith and humility is so great that she is hoping in Jesus mercy that she might even be able to get just a few crumbs off him and this is completely different to the religious Pharisees isn't it because they've come all the way from Jerusalem to conclude that Jesus is unclean but in contrast the woman comes from this position of weakness acknowledging that she herself is unclean doesn't this just show the amount of faith and trust that she has in

Jesus she has faith not only in who he is as the Messiah but she also has faith in Jesus ability to heal her daughter and Jesus knows this so he exclaims that she has great faith and grants her request and right on cue her daughter was healed instantly and by granting her request Jesus shows that he accepts this unclean woman as clean in his eyes she is the one who is truly clean because of her humble heart and great faith and so Matthew here he's giving us this great contrast between the Pharisees and this woman to show us that it is faith and not religion that makes us acceptable to God and so you'll see at the back of your outlines and up on the slide as well this great contrast between the Pharisees and this woman where the Pharisees look down on Jesus in judgment and say wash your hands the woman looks at

Jesus in humility and says have mercy where the Pharisees are offended by Jesus and reject the truth the woman is not offended by Jesus and accepts the truth where the Pharisees ignore who Jesus is the woman has great faith in Jesus as Messiah the King and where the Pharisees are from Israel by birth yet are rejected by God the woman is not from Israel by birth yet is accepted by God so do you see the point Matthew is making here it is faith and not religion that makes us acceptable to God all right so let me ask all of you are you acceptable in God's eyes do you truly have faith or are you trying to rely on religion or doing good things to make you right with God because this is what we try and do we try and live good lives we but actually none of these things deal with the problem of the heart but the good news of the gospel is that

Jesus has the power to heal our heart problem just like he could heal the woman's daughter he can truly heal the condition of our hearts and on the cross Jesus took all of our defilement all of our uncleanness so that we could be made right with him and in return Jesus gives us his righteousness so that now we are right and acceptable in God's eyes and this cannot be earned by doing good things but it can only be received by faith alone faith in humbly admitting our own defilement and trusting in Jesus ability to clean us so have you placed your faith in Jesus to be acceptable to him and for those of you who have placed your faith in Jesus we too must be careful to not fall into the trap of the Pharisees I don't know if you find this but we can often turn good things into rituals this might be going to church every Sunday getting baptized or taking communion don't get me wrong these are all good things but none of this stuff makes us acceptable to

[22 : 41] God because as Jesus says the real problem some of you may know that I have transitioned out of full time work this year to start a ministry apprenticeship at this church and you know what to me this seemed like a big step people were very encouraging of me to pursue this step and I remember thinking to myself wow I've really made it haven't I I'm a pretty good Christian for doing all this stuff I'm doing more things at church now I'm studying the Bible more I'm praying with people more I'm even studying at a Bible college and in my mind I thought for some reason this made me a really good person because of that but looking back I had totally missed the point whilst these are all good things I need to remind myself that none of these things make me more acceptable to God it is so that

I do and miss the real problem of the heart see from the outside these things may appear to be honoring to God but on the inside my heart could still be far from him rather as we heard in our first reading we need to be those who are humble and are contrite in spirit and who tremble at God's word and what's more all of this should cause us to respond in gratitude for what Jesus has done for us we who were once far off from him we who were once dogs have now been made clean and brought into relationship with him not because of anything we have done but solely out of his mercy and his grace so with thankful hearts let's keep putting our trust in Jesus not in our religious activities let's put our trust in a person the Lord Jesus let's pray heavenly father thank you for your son

Jesus Christ who is truly the Messiah our king help us not to rely on religion but to place our trust in you we are sorry for our own hypocrisy and we ask that you would heal us by your power we thank you that we who were once unclean and defiled are now clean and acceptable in your sight what a privilege that is in your son's name amen