What is Wrong?

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] We've made our way to Matthew 15 and if you'd like to turn it up it's on page 820 and 821. When it was read to us at the nine o'clock service the person who was reading it wasn't sure it was the right reading and they've got halfway through the reading and they said is this right?

And I must say as I've worked on it this week I felt a bit the same. So back in chapter 9 Jesus calls himself a spiritual doctor.
And here Dr. Jesus is at his most challenging and radical telling us who we are and what is wrong with the world and what is wrong with us.
And for many people it's a completely unwelcome diagnosis and you may well resist this all the way through the sermon. I hope you don't. Let me show you what I mean.
Just look down at verse 19 and 20 for a moment. Now there is absolutely nothing I can do to convince you of the truth of these words.
[1:20] We have to rely on God the Holy Spirit to give us the ability to believe them. And our work this morning is to understand what Jesus says and ask the Spirit and his power to receive it and believe it.

But I do want to say we cannot understand ourselves all the world we live in without this teaching from Jesus here. You cannot begin to understand the Christian faith or Jesus himself apart from receiving and believing these words.
And every page of the Bible is a record of God's love and goodness trying to solve this issue. What binds this passage together is the human heart.
And the way we speak about heart, the way we think about our heart today is that it's the centre of emotions, affections and feelings and experience. A hearty soup is not thick. A hearty soup is one that makes you feel good.
In the Bible, it's much more than that. The heart is simply the centre, the inner core of who I am and it's the focus of my life.
[2:26] It is the spring of everything. It's the spring of my motives and my passions. It's the spring of my thoughts and my consciences. From my heart flows everything else and it controls what I do and how I think.

We live in a culture of images, of external appearance, of surface and face value. But God looks on the heart.
I can't see in your heart, thankfully. And you can't see in mine, thankfully. But true Christian faith is not a matter of the mind, it's a matter of the heart because it's a matter of love.
And the centre of love is the heart. So Jesus gives us two diagnoses. Dr. Jesus, two diagnoses that move together. And I just want to look at the rest of the passage under those two headings.
Number one, religion cannot change your heart. Verse one, the chapter opens with a clique of religious elite. They've come all the way down from Jerusalem, which is headquarters for Israel, to investigate this upstart teacher in Nazareth.
[3:34] Nazareth is a backwater. The boonies, beyond the black stump. It's a nowhere. And most of these Pharisees and scribes have never travelled outside Jerusalem.

They are the best of the best, highly educated, upright, seriously religious. And they've heard very worrying things about this Jesus. And so they have been sent to probe a little deeper into this Jesus and to set him straight, should they find anything amiss.
And they get right to the point in verse two. If you look down there, they confront Jesus with their grave concern that Jesus' disciples are not following the church tradition of washing their hands before they eat.

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This is not a hygiene issue. This has to do with your approach to God. Let's see if I can explain. In the Old Testament, there's no law about washing your hands before you eat.
But over the years, the great concern of the religious teachers was the worship of God. The world is divided into what is clean and what is unclean. And when we approach God, washing your hands is a sign that you perform to show that you've understood you're approaching a holy God.
[4:52] You can't be serious about the worship of God if you don't wash your hands before a meal. This is what they said. And it had been a tradition in Israel for over hundreds of years. But Jesus treated this tradition with complete contempt.

And the proof is the behavior of his disciples. Now, there is nothing wrong with traditions. We are tradition-making creatures.
And they can be very helpful for our human life together. As Anglicans, we have oodles of traditions. I thought this morning Dan and I might wear Hawaiian shirts just to show you we could break out of tradition.
But if we did that for three weeks in a row, it would become an Anglican tradition. Here is the thing. Traditions can become a helpful expression of the spirituality, but they only work in one direction. They only work this way, from the heart out. They cannot create that inward reality. In fact, too easily, the tradition, the outward thing that we do, becomes a replacement and a substitute for the inward spiritual reality.
[6:02] Take singing. This is not a dig at the choir, but we all sing here. So God commands us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. And we sing songs and hymns.

They're a terrific expression of our love for God. But you can sing with your heart full of dark jealousy and hatred toward the person beside you. And nobody would know any better.
And the problem is that traditions, they just cannot touch the heart. They're visible and outward, and they have the facade of control, and they're easy to repeat over and over.
But nobody can tell what's going on in our hearts. And you can perform every religious tradition in the world to utter perfection, and your inner life be full of darkness and evil. I can preach to you a helpful sermon, and my heart be full of darkness and evil.
And Jesus does not spare their feelings. He says religious traditions are useless for spiritual transformation. And he supplies them with the acid test to discern the tradition.
[7:06] And it's this. Does the tradition lead you to the word of God or away from the word of God? Because the word of God is much more searching. It goes and it divides our hearts.

Look at the contrast Jesus makes. So just look down in verse 2. Their criticism is that the disciples break the tradition of the elders. And in verse 3, Jesus turns on them and says, Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?
And then in verse 6, after giving an illustration, he says, For the sake of your tradition, you've made void the word of God. Simply he's saying, Every tradition has been invented by a human being, but the word of God, the scriptures, come from God.
He is the source. And if you take the word of God out of the church, the church becomes completely powerless. And when it loses the word and when it loses that power, what it tries to do is to try to recapture that power often by multiplying traditions.
And it only does the opposite. Without the word of God, the church is completely irrelevant. It tries to be relevant either liturgically or politically or sociologically because it's got nothing to say.
[8:19] And people stop coming because they've stopped hearing the voice of God. Again, we cannot avoid creating traditions. We are creatures of habit. But they can easily and very quickly become a way of keeping God at a distance while having the appearance of devotion.

The current Anglican way of avoiding and making empty the word of God is Anglican synods, whereby a democratic vote of synod delegates, we exalt our human votes above what the word of God clearly teaches.
It's a particular problem for us as Anglicans. Actually, it's a particular problem for every tradition. I have friends who are Pentecostals, and they say they don't have traditions. But woe betide you if you change something they do in their Sunday gatherings.
We're a pretty traditional church here. And when our hearts are engaged, the Anglican liturgy is an absolutely brilliant scaffolding for the gospel and for the worship of the true God.
But it is possible to love the aesthetics more than the word of God and to celebrate sumptuous liturgies, and our hearts are light years away from God. So the Pharisees weren't concerned that

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the disciples were greedy or self-righteous or didn't love each other, but they'd broken the tradition. [9:42] And so Jesus, look at how Jesus goes after them in verse 7. This is a way you speak to religious leaders. You hypocrites. Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said, this people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

In vain, empty do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. So it does not matter how ancient and how venerable or how widely practiced the tradition, it cannot change your heart and it cannot change mine.
It's so easy to become a hypocrite doing our piety for the applause of others. Because the true worship of the true God is a thing of the heart. The sacrifice that God is looking for is not brilliant traditions brilliantly performed, but as we've sung already, a contrite heart.
God alone searches our hearts. And Jesus says here, his first diagnosis is that religion and tradition cannot wash, cannot clean, cannot change your heart.
That's diagnosis number one. Diagnosis number two, very simply, the heart of the problem is the human heart. Look down with me again.
[11:01] Verse 17, he says to his disciples, do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart.

This defiles a person. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.
You hear what Jesus is saying. The source of evil in this world, the thing that causes murder and violence and sexual immorality and everything else, is not a lack of education or a lack of security or a lack of a positive family.
It is our hearts. Our hearts are more dangerous than the devil in the world. And here from verse 16, Jesus is giving a master seminar to his disciples and he says, the trouble is that the human heart is the source of evil.
Now, some of you may be sitting there saying, this is so depressing. And I need to say, the Bible has a textured view of what it means to be a human being. And there are two sides to this.
[12:11] It teaches us well that we are made in the image of God. And every single human being, it doesn't matter whether they believe in God enough, even though the image has been defaced, there are still vestiges of the image there.

And apart from faith in God, human beings are capable of breathtaking beauty and sacrifice and generosity. And our connections with one another are beautiful and genuine things, especially in families.
I mean, as a grandfather, even if my granddaughter wasn't the most beautiful baby in the world, just holding her for 45 minutes yesterday was enough, humanly, to keep me going for another week.
Jesus doesn't mean we are as bad as we could be, but he is saying we're not as good as we should be. And sin is so deeply embedded in our spiritual system.
Everything we do, everything we do and think and imagine, everything we feel has been touched by sin and corruption. There is no part of us as human beings that's not affected by this, our reasoning, our emotions, our choosing, our affections, because the source and root of the trouble is in our hearts.
[13:21] This is Dr. Jesus' diagnosis. And I want you to see, and I think you're probably thinking with me, it's a worldview diagnosis. That's just a fancy way of saying it gets to the basic questions that everyone thinks about.

You know, where do we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? Every single person has fundamental views about why the world is what it is and what it ought to be. And one of those basic questions is what is wrong with the world?
It's a fundamental question. You know the story, I'm sure, of G.K. Chesterton, a famous Christian author in the early 20th century. One of the English newspapers posed a question for people to write in answers.
And their question is, what is wrong with the world? Here's Chesterton's letter. Dear Sir, I am. Yours sincerely. G.K. Chesterton.
Isn't that great? Jesus' diagnosis of the human heart and human nature is unique. It is entirely different from the way we've been taught to think about ourselves.

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[14:25] Over the past 150 years, we've been taught to believe basically we are good at heart. We have an optimistic and rosy view of human nature, that we're fundamentally good. And when somebody comes into a group of worshippers and murders, guns 50 of them down, we think that evil is out there.

And Jesus says, it's in here. From within, from out of the heart, comes murder, he says, evil, etc. His diagnosis is completely different than the modern secular or post-modern secular view of humanity.
It's different from every other religious worldview. And it's very important because what you think is wrong will control what you think you ought to be doing and your purpose and sense of direction in life and your view of yourself and of others and of the world.
I mean, if you follow Buddha, Buddha's teaching was there is no such thing as a human soul or an enduring self. There's a kind of a flickering flame that moves across through reincarnation.
And evil does not exist within us, but it comes from desire and attachment. If you follow Islam, Islam does not believe that we have a sinful nature.
[15:39] It believes that we are, however, open to temptation and we can be defiled by eating the wrong things or by external forces. And what is wrong with the world is not everyone has submitted to Allah and his prophet in the house of Islam.

If you're a secular person, I mean, an old, an older style, modern secular person, you think we're just merely a physical human being. Now, some would argue you may have a selfish gene and that might be a good thing, but evil does not come from inside me.
It comes from the environment. That's why we're going to try and change the environment. But if you're more postmodern in your thinking, you'll think there's no such thing as human nature. I am good at heart.
And what's wrong with this world is that I need to be free from every taboo and limitation. I need to be free to express the goodness of my heart. Dr. Jesus comes along and says, the source of evil is not outside us.
It's not restrictions. It's inside us. The problem is not my lack of education or lack of money or self-expression. Those things are really good. But it's my own heart that defiles me and cuts me off from God.
[16:50] Jesus is not saying we're basically good and we sin from time to time and need to come back to him, but that we are by nature sinners. We cannot help ourselves from sinning.

And when I sin, I act according to my deepest desires or my second deepest desires. So that what I need is not a new environment or a new neighborhood or a new job or a new government or a new wife.
What I need is a new heart. So this has massive implications. And I think we have time just to spell out four of them. So let me just mention four for you to take home.
Number one, I think this explains why people do not naturally love Jesus. It's why people don't flock to come and hear him. It's why Christianity is increasingly treated with suspicion and even hostility. It's because of this diagnosis by Dr. Jesus. We all want to think of ourselves as pretty decent, moral, upright and sincere. Sure, we're not perfect, but to err is human, right?
[17:55] What Jesus says runs completely different than my experience. It's uncomplimentary. It's even insulting to say evil arises out of my heart. But when you look across the Bible, the Bible says that we cannot know the depths of our own hearts.

We skim along the surface and every now and again, I glimpse the depths of my heart. And I very quickly cover it over so that nobody else can see it. The prophet Jeremiah says, The heart is deceitful above all things, desperately sick.
Who can understand it? Implied, we can't understand it. The next verse says, I, the Lord, search the heart and test the mind. And because I cannot understand it, because I don't know my own heart, I do not have the ability to make myself clean.
But God alone searches and knows our hearts and he is engaged at every step of this. But our hearts are so slippery and crafty, apart from God's word to us, we are self-deceived. That's why, that's why Christianity is not popular.
The second implication, we need to be sceptical of shallow solutions. You see, if the problem was shallow and if evil was just out there, I think we would be able to find a way to put a stop to evil.

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[19:16] If we all tried hard enough and we all pulled together and we joined hands around the world. But if the problem is deep and if it's within us, I shouldn't be surprised when shallow solutions fall apart.

If Dr. Jesus is right, it's going to take a massive spiritual work to clean up my heart and give me a new heart. And in a couple of weeks, we come to celebrate Easter.
We see Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey to the celebration and acceptance of the crowd. We see him going into the temple and cleansing and teaching in the temple.
And as the hostility grows and he is betrayed and tried and arrested, he is crucified. And on the cross, he calls out, my God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why?
Why did the Son of God go to such lengths? Because it took the giving of the Son of God's life to do the work of cleansing and renewing our hearts.
[20:19] The third implication, and this is an implication for us as believers together. And it's this. We need to give each other the benefit of the doubt. I am far more sinful than you could imagine.

I am far more cleansed and forgiven than you could imagine. We need to give each other the benefit of the doubt. To treat each other with mercy. Because even after we come to faith in Jesus Christ, yes, he gives us a new nature, but I still have the old nature.
And they are at war with each other. Those of you who are in catechism will be pleased with this. I'm not going to get you to do it, but if you turn up sometime and look at the 39 articles at the back of the Book of Common Prayer, for all those who are newcomers, you know what this is.
Article number 9, these are doctrines that we as Anglicans share together. I'll read it to you. I'll just read you part of it. It's strong stuff. Article 9 is of original or birth sin.
It says, Original sin is the corruption of the nature of every man and woman, whereby man and woman is very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth contrary to the spirit.
[21:36] Here's the key line. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated. Even after we are regenerated, this infection remains.

We all struggle with our old nature. We will keep struggling with it until we go to be with Christ. And we need to give each other the benefit of the doubt, brothers and sisters. We need to see each other as Jesus sees us, both as those struggling with sin and those who have been cleansed and forgiven.
We don't have to pretend to be perfect, but love covers a multitude of sins. And the fourth implication is simply who it is who's saying this.
Who it is who's saying this. I have a friend in hospital here in Vancouver, and this week he heard the head doctor say to him, there is nothing more that we can do for you.
What's happening in his body is beyond his abilities and beyond the current abilities of medicine. I think that is the most difficult diagnosis to hear.
[22:41] His doctors are compassionate and trustworthy and completely unable to help, and they've told him the truth. But these words about the state of our heart come to us from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God with us.

And they're spoken with compassion and with certainty. And they tell us that our hearts are beyond our abilities to heal, but not beyond his.
And that's exactly why he came from heaven, to be born as a baby, to share our human flesh. He came, you remember in chapter one, to save his people from their sins. And there's nothing I can do to renew and to cleanse and to purify my heart.
Every tradition that tries to do that, and every time I try to do that, I'm just washing my hands. But he has come to take our place. He has come to wash our hearts and to give us new hearts, and he does that through his death.
And if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So what we need to do is we need to draw near to Jesus Christ.
[23:51] He is our purity. He is our righteousness. He is our newness. It's all in him. And when we bring our hearts to him, he refreshes and cleanses.

So brothers and sisters, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean, from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed through pure water.
Amen.

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