

June 17, 2018

Lesson 3: Jesus Teaches About Justice

Scripture: Matthew 15: 1-9

Context:

Today's lesson continues with God as just and merciful as Jesus discusses what is true justice. Once again in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus finds himself with some Pharisees and legal experts from the city of Jerusalem. They have observed the disciples breaking some of the elders' rules that have been passed down through the generations. According to tradition, they are to purify their hands by washing before they eat food. However, they neglect to ritually purify themselves with this simple act.

Jesus's response to them is not to focus so much on the ritual purity. He focuses on the fact that even within scripture there are contradictions. He takes on one hand the commandment to honor your father and mother and then discusses how later on "the tradition of the elders" changed something. Jesus is referring to the problem of the *Qorban* vow.¹ This Hebrew term used in the Torah for gifts dedicated to God. The *Qorban* vow occurred whenever a son, angry with his parents, could make the vow that all of his property given by his parents to him would go straight to the Temple.² As a result, the vow could not be reneged and a son could have revenge against parents so that they were penniless and destitute in old age. This particular law would have greatly benefitted the legal experts in Jerusalem and different religious groups as they jockeyed for people's attention and favor.

Jesus's response goes on to say that these individuals are hypocrites and that they are no better than their ancestors. Isaiah also let the people know that the people were good at quoting scripture and following laws, but their hearts were not close to God. They were focused on human rules that favored them and their interests. Jesus is challenging the rigorous piety of some of his contemporaries by focusing on that that they give precedence to God's moral commandments.³ Yet as they do so, they miss the bigger picture of what God has called them to do.

None of this commentary suggests that Jesus is against ritual purity or the laws of the Pentateuch. Instead, he is setting a path for the early church in which there will be Gentiles, those who are new to the idea of law and commandments as part of the religious tradition. An audience reading this text would understand that Jesus has followers from different backgrounds. There are those who Christian Jews who are used to the laws concerning ritual purity. There are also those who Gentile Christians who are learning to exist with those whose piety is different from anything they've ever known. Jesus is making the point that to get in a contest of who is more pure or upright than the other misses the point of the laws and covenant God has made with humanity. Christ has come

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1993), 174.

² *Ibid.*, 174.

³ *Ibid.*, 173.

for all.

Application:

At first glance, one may wonder what this text has to do with the church today. We know today very well that hand washing before meals is for us a matter of hygiene and not of ritual impurity. We do not worry about circumcision or if certain fabrics have been mixed with other fabrics. We definitely do not worry about the healthy choices of our food; bacon is still yummy and lots of people have it for breakfast any time they can get it.

Yet, we still find the perfect opportunities to quarrel with one another over piety issues and seek for moments when we accuse one another of not being spiritual or religious enough. We can even slip into moments where we do not even look at scripture, but instead jump to tradition and people pleasing as a guide to how we live as “disciples of Jesus Christ.” At times we can be guilty of placing tradition ahead of God’s moral will.⁴ This can come in all different ways. Sometimes we do not try new things because it’s too scary to do so. Sometimes we do not give new people leadership positions because it upsets the status quo. At times we may even think that certain people do not belong in the church because they may have a past or do things that we do think is improper for a good Christian. When it comes to ministry, we can get stuck doing things the same way we have always done them and we will always get the result we want. The phrase “we’ve always done it that way,” is the phrase that has become a bane in the existence of ministry.

God has called the church to a different way of being. We are not to get caught up in just doing things the way they’ve always been done just for the sake of continuity. We are not just to follow tradition for the sake of following tradition. We are to be active disciples always praying and looking out for our neighbors, especially those who do not look like us. We are to make our allegiance to Jesus Christ and not the idols of this world. And we are to honor our Lord not just with our lips, but with our actions and our hearts.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Associate Pastor
First United Methodist Church
1380 W. Main St.
Dothan, AL 36301
Office (334) 793-3555 ext. 240
E-mail: hunter@fumcdothan.org



⁴ Ibid., 175.