

## Easier Said than Done

August 30, 2009

Rev. David Chadwell posed a rather interesting question:

Which would you prefer for a good friend: a person of excellent habits, or a person with a good heart?

Which would you prefer for a husband or a wife: a person of excellent habits, or a person with a good heart?

Which would you prefer for a child: a child with excellent habits, or a child with a good heart?

It is wonderful to have a friend who always treats you with consideration.

It is wonderful to be married to a husband who always is thoughtful and courteous, or to a wife who always is gracious in her comments and deeds.

It is wonderful to have a son or daughter who shows respect and uses good manners.

As wonderful as those situations are, none of them compare to having a neighbor, a friend, a husband, a wife, a son, or a daughter with a good heart.

When you discuss good behavior, you are discussing the quality of a person's self-control. When you discuss a good heart, you are discussing the quality of the person.

This is the focus of today's Scripture. Pharisees and teachers have come down from Jerusalem and, interestingly, they are gathered around Jesus watching the disciples. The disciples, it seems, are eating lunch. They have come in from the day's work. Too tired and too hungry to care that their hands and faces were dirty, they immediately sat down to eat without washing.

The Pharisees cease upon this ceremonial oversight and question Jesus: Why don't your disciples live according to the traditions of the elders and clean their hands before they eat? This is all that Jesus needs to hear. He sticks up for his disciples, turns on these teachers and says in essence, "Why don't you live according to the traditions of God and clean your hearts?"

What mistake did these Pharisees make? What is Jesus trying to convey, not only to them, but to us as well. For you see, it is just as easy for us to fall into a good habit and leave behind a good heart. What is Jesus' warning to us?

Jesus is warning us not to prefer creeds to deeds. I like the story about Queen Victoria who was at a diplomatic reception in London. The guest of honor was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal, until, at the end, finger bowls were served. The guest of honor had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief him before hand about its purpose. So he

took the finger bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents--down to the very last drop!

For an instant there was breathless silence among the British upper crust and then they began to whisper to one another. All that stopped in the next instant as the Queen, Victoria, silently took her finger bowl in her two hands, lifted it, and drank its contents! A moment later 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank the contents of their own fingerbowls.

It was "against the rules" to drink from a fingerbowl, but on that particular evening Victoria changed the rules---because she was, after all, the Queen. It is "against the rules" not to wash your hands before you eat and on that the Pharisees called the hand of the disciples who follow Jesus. But Jesus recognizes their hypocrisy and he quotes from Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me."

Our tradition should not kill our compassion.

Our first priority is our devotion to God but did you know that that devotion can sometimes hinder our Christian discipleship. That's precisely what happened here. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law made a rule. The rule was called Corban. It held that when a gift was devoted to God, it couldn't be rescinded. Let's say you pledge a certain amount of money next year to the church, 10,000 dollars. That money is Corban. It has been devoted to God. That's a good thing. But then tragedy strikes and your parents need financial help. As your pastor I expect you to reduce your gift to the church and give it to your parents. Which is greater, Moses' Commandment to honor your parents or your pledge to help the church?

The Pharisees got into trouble because they used their Corban rule to lock people into gifts they could not keep when trouble came. That's not love that's law.

Secondly, Jesus is warning us not to look at the outside habits but rather the inside motives. It is interesting that the Pharisees chose to send a delegation all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee, a 60-mile journey. The delegation is not there for a spot of tea. They have come to observe for a while. How long we do not know but you can bet that their presence was not welcomed. And why is this? Because, as was so often the case, they were not on a fact-finding mission but a fault-finding mission.

Looking for any reason to hang Jesus they cease upon a minor infraction. The disciples are faulted for not performing the religious ritual of hand washing before they ate, an "unclean" act. Now what's going on here? What does "unclean" mean? The obvious explanation, as you might have guessed, is dirty hands. But the practice of washing was not done for reasons of health; in that day, it was done for religious purity. It was thought that the normal activities and

circumstances of everyday living made a Jew unclean before God. Pouring water over the hands washed away this defilement.

It's an interesting question: Can outside rituals make us inside saints?

Do clean hands make for a clean heart? To answer this Jesus called the crowd to his side and with the Pharisees and Teachers looking on he said, "Nothing outside a man can make him unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean."

Dirty hands do not make a dirty heart. From within, Jesus said, not from without. It is greed not grime, malice not money, deceit not dust that makes us unclean. Water will not wash away sexual immorality. Religious rituals will not cleanse us from envy, slander, and arrogance. All these evils, Jesus said, come from inside and make a man "unclean."

God is interested in good hearts not good habits, for habit's sake. He is interested in the inside not the outside. These are the two lessons we should take with us this morning.

Rituals are good things. If pouring water over our hands to remove dirt reminds us that we need daily, to wash our hearts; practice generosity, kindness, faithfulness, humility, and fidelity to our spouses, then that is a good thing. If, on the other hand, we think the simple act of pouring water over our hands makes us acceptable before God then that is a bad thing.

This takes us back to James' teaching that we should not just be hearers of the Word, but we should be doers of it.

You see, don't you? You can have all your "i's" dotted and all your "t's" crossed. You can perform all the right rituals and recite word for word the creeds but they won't make you clean before God. Religion, if it is good religion, is from the heart – it is lived out in such a way that it brings joy to you, to those around you, and to God.

Frederick Buechner imagined a youngster learning to play the piano. "The child holds her hands just as she's been told...she has memorized the piece perfectly. She has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But her heart's not in it, only her fingers. It's the difference between just playing notes and making music.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts so that we can live out the Word we have heard, then we are set free – set free from rules and set free to love.