

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, this morning we come. We come to improve ourselves, to deepen our faith, to take lessons with into the world. We come to be with one another, to deepen relationships, to strengthen our ties with one another in Christian love and care. By the power of the Holy Spirit, refresh us. Prepare us anew for a life that is often difficult, life that pulls us away from the truly important to what is important in the moment. Train our eyes to stay on those things that you value, God. Especially, God, we lift up the prayers on our minds and hearts to you, those spoken or on our hearts; remind us how to best be of service to those in need, for those names we know and those names we will never know.

Holy One, we hear the words of Jesus as graceful but demanding of us at the same time. Sometimes we like to go through the motions and think that we have done well. We think that if we come to church, even though we have our minds on things to take care of later or just do nice things for others without giving them much a thought that we have fulfilled your gospel. The Lord Jesus reminds us otherwise. Just as we are one person in spirit and in flesh, we are to serve you with our actions and our heartfelt intentions. We seek this completion and ask for your Holy Spirit to fill us. We shall move our feet and ask you to guide our steps, not the other way around. We pray these things in the name of the Lord of faithful hearts and actions, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one, saying...

SERMON

(Spoken while sitting with uncaring tone) I guess it's time for the sermon once again. You heard the scripture. I'll just get to the point. The words of Jesus in this Gospel of Matthew are very important. You know, Jesus does a lot in telling us that it's not what goes into the body that defiles a person but what comes out. So don't say bad things. This

story is about good intentions and good actions. Both are important. You have to be very good with what you say and what you do and what you think, because if you don't, then you're being a bad person and Jesus doesn't like that. And you don't want to do what Jesus doesn't like, because that makes you a sinner. Don't be a sinner. Sinners are bad. If we learn anything here, it is that Jesus doesn't like people to be sinners. Be like Jesus instead because Jesus is a great example. That covers it, and we're about two minutes in. Amen. Fantastic. Let's sing our final hymn and be on our merry way. Hit it, Connie.

Well, that's the sermon. Was it worth your time? It wasn't worth mine. There was no thought, no passion, just words without any of me in it. It was an obligation instead of joyful service. You easily see when something is just an obligation; it's just awkward. Of course, there are many things in our lives that we just don't wanna. Go to the dentist. Eat your vegetables. Take out the trash. So we do them, often without a joyful spirit. If we do anything with a sense of obligation, then we aren't engaging in service. We're doing a task, a chore. That's not worth our time or God's time. That is serving from the Word of the Law over the Spirit of the Law. Let's take time to understand what Jesus is saying in this scripture passage, look at the difference between the Word of the Law and the Spirit of the Law, and put this important idea into practice.

The context of Jesus' statement is of utmost importance. Don't forget that Jesus was a Jew through and through, and he's seeking to bring Judaism into fullness. Contrary to opinion, he does not abolish Judaism; he brings Judaism to completion with his teachings. He speaks to those in authority, those in charge of the temple and Pharisees, who lost their way, who forgot the real point. Here he does that very well. Jesus goes head-to-head with their teaching: purity and what defiles purity. Their reading of the scriptures, the Old

Testament, led them to teach that what you eat makes you unclean. Jesus says that's not the point, and that's interfering with good teaching. "Every plant that my Heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted." Indeed, what does not come from God will be easily exposed in due time. But Jesus gives them something else to think about. "What comes out of the mouth," he says, what we say, "proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." Jesus is adding another layer and saying that faithfulness truly from God will grow, while a half-faithful approach will fail. It's not simply about the right action but the right heart, the right intention, the right mentality that makes the right actions right.

This scripture shows us something very important about Jesus' character. In a way, he's reshaping the idea of Judaism, but in another way, he is not. How's that for definitive? Jesus does not say that these things are not worthwhile; he does not abolish the practices of the Pharisees, but he emphasizes right intention. In a way, he's trying to protect the overarching point of living an exceptional Jewish life by keeping the words intact by a good spirit. If one seeks to serve well, but has a heart not attuned to service, what's the point? It's easy to see the simple effects on our lives. How would you feel if Wayne suddenly lost the good intentioned spirit when you come into the sanctuary? "Good morning, here's your bulletin, go find an empty seat. No, don't really care how you're doing, just go sit down." A lot would be lost, wouldn't it? Remember, above all, the one thing Jesus called out about the Pharisees. It was not that they were not faithful people who understood the scripture well. They did, and they did it well. But they missed the most important thing about scripture: there is a written word of the Law, and there is also the Spirit of the Law that is

the real point behind it. Without the Spirit, the Word of the Law becomes dry, stale, and binding, killing off faithfulness in rote obedience.

Jesus here harkens back to a simple principle: the Word of the Law vs. the Spirit of the Law. There's a world of difference. I remember one story that my Father-in-Law Jim told me. He is a former church organist and had all the stories to go with it. Sometimes people honored his gift, and sometimes they could be rather selfish. One Sunday morning, he was playing the prelude. A member of the congregation came up to him and told him that he shouldn't be playing so loudly, as it said in the bulletin to prepare for the service silently. Jim's only response was: "That's for you, not me!" It's so easy to get wrapped up in the exact words of something that we forget the whole point. The point of that blurb in the bulletin, I assume, was to invite those in the congregation to gather their minds and hearts to worship fully. By, well, attacking my Father-in-Law for his act of worship, this member of the congregation invalidated his own spirit of worship as well as that of my Father-in-Law. The point is that it's not just about what something says; we should always be considering what the original point was anyway. For our acts of worship, we can say the same things. We don't stand for hymns so that we can test if your legs are still working. We stand out of a sense of unity and respect. If some prefer to stand in spirit, there's nothing wrong with that at all.

There's a very fertile ground with this principle, and it can be pinpointed to three words that the Christian can say that are either full of life and love or completely destroy all credibility with everyone else. Know what they are? They are: "The Bible says..." And here is a place for big trouble. Sometimes we can't take what we read at face value; it takes deep study and contemplation. We have to seek out the Spirit of the Law that brings the Word of

the Law to completion. While we remember that Christ always was invitational, Christ always loved those that the world did not, we can shut off people to the value of Christ's message by saying those three words with a toxic message. The Pharisees shut off so many people and led them astray by focusing on what scripture says at the expense of what it means. After all, I can say those three words with some messages that just don't work. "The Bible says shellfish are an abomination. Don't eat shrimp, sinner." Or, "The Bible says that we aren't supposed to wear garments of more than one kind of fiber. I can see that each and every one of you are sinners today." I think it's fair to say that none of these are the point. Indeed, even here, it's clear that Jesus was not about the Word of the Law as he was about the Spirit of the Law. The Spirit of the Law is life-giving. The Spirit of the Law is renewing. The Spirit of the Law is based in love and caring for all people and not about nitpicking for places to trip up the other person. It's not about the symptoms but the root of the matter. A heart full of anger and hate does not produce faithful action and care, so a begrudging, angry person does not live a life of joyful service. There is only unhappiness where there should be joy, and that is not what the Gospel asks of us.

And that harkens back to the idea of who we are doing these things for. Sometimes these tasks really stink, but it matters who you doing them for. Things can clarify. Are we doing it for our personal resumes? Are we doing it because someone asked us to? Are we doing it to get recognition and praise? We will be disappointed, we will grow weary, we will grow bitter when our service has these intentions. But when we do them for God with devotion, we are worshipping. We lift up God in our acts, and when we do so, we will never be disappointed. Things have new meaning; we realize that everything we give is given

lovingly. When these acts are devoted to God, then we know that we are always fulfilling the Spirit of the Law, never the Word of the Law.

Ask yourself what your spirit is saying. Is there love and joyful service, or is there obligation and frustration? If it is the latter, we are out of touch. We have become like the Pharisees, serving the Word of the Law; the Spirit of the Law has gone out the window. This place is not about the Word of the Law because that's not what Jesus was about. We are not here because we have to be here, because we assume that God is checking off an attendance list. We come to God's house because we want to celebrate, to love, to care, to lift each other up. We are here because we want to. And from a willing spirit comes joyful...and faithful...service. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.