

# The Heart of the Matter

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Mark 7:1-23

**Sermons Series:**  
**In Christ Together**  
**for the World**

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Last fall, when Pete assigned this Sunday to me and I looked at the text, I thought, Are you kidding me? I have to preach on the Pharisees? Why does Pete get all the miracles? I want to preach on a healing, or casting out a demon, feeding of the 5,000. And then a thought came to me. I'm pretty sure it was the Holy Spirit saying, Who would be better suited to teach about the Pharisees than you? You see, my name is Glenda, and I am a recovering Pharisee. My whole spiritual life has been a journey of moving away from tendencies to try living up to outward expectations and standards of righteousness to the heart of the matter—a life that is transformed by the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Spirit.

I confess that for a long time I didn't understand why Jesus was always so hard on the Pharisees. They were highly respected religious leaders, and they really cared about God and the things of God. They seemed to be trying to live a good life and to do the right thing, which is true. But it was also the problem. Jesus was hard on the Pharisees because they were self-righteous. That is, they believed their good works made

them good people and acceptable to God. In the Old Testament, God says over and over again to his people—  
“Remember: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Before the people believed or did anything, God delivered them; God saved them by His grace.

Jesus is hard on the Pharisees because they forgot, and he challenges the fact that they have substituted the traditions of men and moved away from the word of God. They have become so focused on external issues, righteous beliefs, and outward practices such as kosher laws and purification rites that they don't even recognize their need for God any more. They have devised a religious system in which they are their own god, their own savior. They can keep the rules and do what is right and so earn favor with God. What's worse is that they expect everyone else to fall into line with this belief system with its burdensome practices, because they are convinced they are right and everyone else is wrong. This passage reminded me of one of my favorite quotes:

Those things we cannot accept in ourselves we project

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***Jesus is the present acting and reigning Lord. He is the Messiah, the Christ.***

upon others. If I do not admit my shadow side, I will unconsciously find another who will carry my shadow for me. Once this projection is made then, I need not be upset with myself. My problems are now outside and I can fight them out there rather than within the real arena, myself. (John English, *Spiritual Pilgrims*)

The Pharisees want to focus on externals and fight the problem outside rather than face the truth within themselves. And one way they do so is by making Jesus, his disciples, and their lack of conformity to the law the problem. These particular Pharisees and Scribes, who come from Jerusalem, are familiar enemies of Jesus. Their question is not an innocent wonderment about why Jesus' disciples did not conform to the law. Jesus' teaching and ministry is gaining traction, and he is posing a threat to their authority and their way of life. In essence, they come seeking to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowds and, thus, undermine his authority as a teacher, hoping people will turn away from him. Jesus' response not only serves as a rebuke to the Pharisees but also allows him to gain command of the situation. The Pharisees are hypocrites, whose hearts are far from God. While they want to focus on externals, Jesus will focus on the heart of the matter.

Now keep in mind what has been happening. Jesus has

walked on the water, calmed the wind and the sea, he has healed the sick, cast out demons, fed 5,000 people, forgiven people of their sins, and even raised the dead. He is performing mighty deeds and proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand; salvation is here. And what do the Pharisees ask? "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Are you kidding me? They asked the wrong question, indicating their utter blindness. The question they should have asked is who? Who is this? Who is Jesus? Who is doing these deeds that only God can do? Who is forgiving sin that only God can forgive? This is the question of Jesus' identity. This is the heart of the matter: Jesus is *not* just another teacher or great moral example. Jesus is the present acting and reigning Lord. He is the Messiah, the Christ. And while the Pharisees' tactics may *seek* to discredit him, they cannot do it.

The second question we have been exploring is also relevant: Why did Jesus come? This has to do with Jesus' mission. Jesus came to accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. The Pharisees view the human dilemma as broken law. They believe that if they just follow all the right rules in just the right way, they will be okay.

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They believe they will be saved *because* of their moral righteousness.

But they've got it all wrong. Our human problem is not outward manifestations of uncleanness. Our problem is not that we have broken the law or failed to keep the rules of God. Our problem is a broken relationship with God. The heart of the matter is the sin deep within that separates us from God. And there is nothing we can do externally about that problem.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24).

The law was not given as an agent of healing. The law was given as a thermometer to show us we are sick. The law was not given to make us clean. The law was given as a mirror to help us see that we are dirty. The law makes clear that we fall short of the glory of God. But the law cannot forgive our sins. The law cannot make us holy. The law cannot heal our brokenness. What's more, the Pharisees failed to understand that they could never fulfill the law. *No* ordinary human person can fulfill the law.

We need a Savior to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is the good news—the gospel. Jesus does not toss the law out. No, no, no. Jesus

takes the law so seriously that he fulfilled it in *his* life and ministry, and he paid the penalty for our disobedience in *his* death, so we can be saved. God does not call us merely to external compliance. This is the heart of the matter—God wants our hearts to be changed, and it is only *in* Christ, *through* Christ, and *by* Christ that our hearts *can* be changed. We cannot change ourselves.

So, then, the third question is relevant: What is our response? Trust Jesus and follow him. As the God-man, Jesus has done all that was necessary for our salvation, so now we are to respond. This involves two movements. The first is to repent—to turn around. This doesn't mean simply that we are sorry for specific sins. Repentance is admitting our effort of self-salvation, our effort at trying to be our own savior. So we are to repent not only of law-breaking but of law-relying. We trust in Jesus knowing that we are accepted by God, not because of what we do but because of who he is and what he has done for us. This means we change not so much the amount of faith but the object of our faith. We turn from our-selves and our effort to Christ and his effort on our behalf. Then, as a consequence of what he has done for us, we seek to live a life of gratitude that is reflected in a passion to know Christ and to serve him.

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The Apostle Paul is probably the most famous Pharisee. He said that if anyone had reason to be confident in personal accomplishments or zeal for the law, it was him. But he wrote in Philippians 3:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of *his* resurrection and the sharing of *his* sufferings by becoming like *him* in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:7-11).

Paul repented of his reliance on the law and his own efforts to make him righteous and trusted in Christ. His life was then characterized by gratitude and a passion to participate in Christ's life, death, resurrection and ministry.

Paul is a wonderful model for me because, as I said earlier, I am Pharisee at heart. I was raised going to a Protestant church every week reciting the Nicene Creed. I believed what I was saying—at least intellectually, but I confess that my understanding of faith was very limited. Though I knew that Christ had died for me, somehow I still missed the point of

God's grace and the meaning of faith.

God was a part of my life, but only a part. I had an idea in my head about what it meant to be good, and I was trying really hard to be good enough as a daughter, student, athlete, leader. But I never really felt like I measured up—that I really was good enough.

So I went away to college with two very specific purposes—to get an education and to find God. During my first year of college, God found me, and I made some remarkable discoveries—particularly regarding what faith is not.

First, faith is not beliefs about God. Like the Pharisees, I knew a lot about God. I could say numerous creeds and liturgies and quote Bible verses about God and pray. I was very religious, but I can honestly say I did not know God. I did not have a real, personal relationship with God.

I also discovered that faith is not strongly held convictions about right and wrong. I was a very odd teenager in the sense that I was not rebellious like many are. I had this very strict sense of right and wrong that I tried to adhere to, but the irony was that I had little peace and little joy.

Finally, I discovered that faith is not moral perfection either. I was trying really hard to be good enough, but in my heart I wasn't and never would be. It was a great gift to realize that and to finally turn my

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attention away from myself and my own efforts to Christ and what he did for me.

But I also came to know what faith is: Faith is receiving and relying on God's grace in Jesus Christ. That's a lot different from working for salvation or earning God's favor. I came to realize that God loved me already, not because of anything I had done to deserve it but because of who He is and what He has done for me in Jesus Christ.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

God has done all that was necessary to save me in Jesus Christ. Salvation is a gift of God, and, like any gift, it must be received. What joy and peace flooded my life as I realized that God was not asking me to do one more thing. I repented from my self-effort and trusted Christ and his grace. You could say I turned from religion and began a relationship with Christ, and my life was transformed. I experienced joy and peace like I never knew was possible, and it was evident to those around me. That was over 30 years ago. But that's not the end of the story.

God has continued to change me. I thank God I am not the person I once was. But I

confess to you, that willful, striving person is my default position, and I still go there and live there far more than I really want to admit. I still fall prey to the Pharisaical temptation that it's all up to me.

I share my own story and my ongoing struggle with you for this reason: I think there is a real danger to live more like the Pharisees than we realize. You are here because you care about God and the things of God. And that is good. But we must be careful that we do not ignore the shadow side—the sin nature within. And what's more, we also live in a culture that inundates us with the message that it's all up to us.

Those of us raised in America are probably more influenced by the Protestant work ethic than we are by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Most of us were raised hearing the children's tale of *The Little Engine That Could*, which promotes the value of optimism and hard work. Most approaches to the Christian life and ministry adhere to the same idea that everything—life, faith, discipleship, ministry—is left up to us to do, as we chant the demented mantra “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” Certainly we will invoke a little help from the Holy Spirit, but even so, we think the ball is now in our court. It is up to us. Faith becomes a matter of will, discipleship becomes a matter of obedience, ministry becomes a matter of duty. But that's a

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misconception. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20:

...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The Christian life is meant to be understood in terms of participation in Christ's life—what he has done, is doing, and will do for us. The abundant, fruitful, joy-filled life is not just a possibility for us or a promise for the future. It actually already exists. Those who trust Christ are in union with Christ, and so we are drawn into this life of love, and joy and peace. Christ's life is ours, right here, right now. We are in union with Christ and participate in his life on earth by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As Christians who know the gospel and have been changed by it, nevertheless, we continually revert to works, righteousness and self-salvation. We believe the gospel at one level, but we continue to live and minister as if it is all up to us. So let us get to the heart of the matter in our real everyday experience.

Think about why you come to worship. Do you come because you feel you should or for what *you* can get out of it? Or do you come because God is mysteriously present when His people come together. And so we join with God's people to

offer ourselves and to show our love because He is so good and so beautiful and so worthy of our worship.

How do you approach your work? Do you drive to work each day thinking it is all up to you—that nothing will get done unless you do it? Do you fear that you will make a mistake or forget something and have to deal with serious repercussions? Or do you believe Christ is already present, doing his work with the people you will interact with there in that place. You are simply joining with him in what he is doing.

How do you approach your relationships? Do you do things for others, even those you love, so they will respect or love you, or because you hope they will meet your needs? Or do you really believe that Jesus has already loved you with an everlasting love and given you the joy and privilege of sharing *his* love with those around you, particularly those near and dear to you?

Those of us involved in parenting and mentoring children and youth need to be very careful about what we are communicating to young people. Our culture puts so much pressure on kids to perform and earn their way in school, sports and other activities. Kids today are stressed out and are being conditioned to live a life of works as if their whole future depends on them and what they do. That is a lie straight from

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the pit of hell, and our culture feeds it to our children every-day.

Please don't misunderstand me. There are things to do. There are lessons to learn. There are responsibilities to be carried out and achievements to be gained. But we need to accept that the life we are now living is Christ's life. We can give up the "I think I can" mantra, and start saying and believing, "I knew he could, I knew he would," as we learn to live our lives in dependence on the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

It is not all up to us. Christ has already given us an abundant life by his grace. He is still working on our behalf, and we are simply participating in what he has already done, is doing and will do for us. Do you see the difference? This is a radical way of living as we trust Jesus and his work for us and respond in gratitude, participating in his life, love, joy and peace. This is a radically different posture from believing and living as if it is all up to us.

This passage, this sermon gets to the heart of the matter. This is an invitation to each of us to examine our hearts to see whether we are truly living what we say we believe. Are we trusting our efforts and outward actions to gain approval from God and others? Or are we trusting Christ and allowing him to transform our hearts so that we become the kind of people who reflect his

love and goodness in the world?

Friends, we never stop needing to rely on Christ and his grace to accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish on our own. We can learn to live into this grace and power day-by-day, moment-by-moment. How? As we spend time with Jesus and contemplate, meditate on who he is and what he has done for us. As we do, our hearts will be transformed by the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Spirit. And as our hearts are changed, our lives will reflect more and more the abundant, fruitful, joy-filled life in which Christ himself is present and living in our midst. Believe it! Live it!