

From the Inside Out                      2020  
Psalm 36:5-10      Matthew 15:1-2, 10-20

Psalm 36:5-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Matthew 15:1-2, 10-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this 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."

A small child was praying, kneeling by the bed one night,  
and after saying the line, "and if I die before I wake..."  
suddenly stopped, and paused for a moment,  
then jumped up and ran out of the room.

Then, returned a few minutes later,  
knelt back down and explained,  
"I thought about what I had just prayed,  
and had to go and fix something with someone  
before I could go on with my prayer."

That child already knows something about God and about prayer,  
and already understands something very important  
about what truly matters and makes a difference to God.

**So what does God want from us, and what does really matter to God?**

As that little one understood, there's more to prayer  
than just the outward act of reciting the right words...  
**... external religion alone doesn't make a person righteous inside.**

It's possible to lead a nearly faultless life before others,

and yet carry the most bitter and evil thoughts imaginable within.  
Authentic Christian life is not just what we do and say,  
but also includes what **we want & wish** we could say or do.

The point is, faithful Christianity  
is not limited to outward rituals that appear to be righteous,  
but that God's concern is the true content of our hearts  
even more than the behavior that we present out into the world.

It's our inner integrity and character that matter most to God,  
**for it's from the internal self, our stuff we hide inside  
from which our outward behavior, good or evil, will flow.**

And that is the point and message of the Matthew passage we read,  
and the source of conflict between Jesus & the Pharisees, vs. 1-2.  
Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples  
break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."

Understand that the Pharisee's hand washing before eating  
had nothing to do with actual hygiene or cleanliness or Covid-19.  
And so yes it's OK for parents to insist that their children  
actually wash their hands before coming to the dinner table.

In a fairly complicated process of rules, customs and traditions,  
hands had to be washed according to exact religious ritual,  
in water specifically set aside for that single purpose,  
**or were considered unclean and unacceptable to God.**

These were not commands from God nor even drawn from Scripture,  
but were the accumulated traditions and rituals of the  
religious authorities that had built up over time.

In this passage, the religious authorities were intending  
to make Jesus look foolish and unworthy before the crowd  
by making his disciples seem like ignorant bumpkins,  
who as rough fishermen lacked religious sophistication  
sufficient to get the details of the ritual just right.

To the Pharisees, God demanded a religious perfection that meant  
avoiding any contaminating-contact with anything worldly,  
and careful attention to every detail of tradition and ritual.

Their religious practices epitomized zealous fervor to the Law,  
**an illusion of worthy perfection** in order to be accepted by God.

Their focus was on external compliance and outward behavior

with far less concern or focus on the condition of the heart.

It was all about **diligent human effort** in order to please God  
through outward religious compliance to countless rules,  
which they believed entitled them to receive good from God.

To the religious teachers, external things **defined** the internal,  
so they focused on visible behaviors that could be observed.  
They assumed that outward religious traditions and appearances  
determined whether or not someone was clean and acceptable to God.

Such a faith focused on looking pious and making a good impression,  
but might not actually express a genuine affection of the heart,  
was harshly condemned by Jesus, vs. 14, 20

Let them alone (or ignore them); they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit. ... to eat with unwashed hands does not **defile**.

The word, **defile** inferred a particular theological perspective.  
The word itself means to pollute or corrupt something,  
and so something that was good is now impure, damaged & defective.  
Defile, from the Pharisees' perspective  
meant that something was ceremonially impure and unclean.

So if your hands were ritually defiled, then you were defiled,  
and considered unclean and unacceptable to be in God's presence,  
which meant that **something external and outward**  
**controlled the internal**, your relationship with God.

**But external religion and rituals alone don't change the human heart.**  
We can do all the outward signs and rituals of religion,  
and still be greedy, selfish, bitter, cold and corrupt.

It isn't by what we touch or what we eat that defiles,  
but it's **a corruption of the good that we allow to reside within.**  
**It's a heart condition, our life of faith and walk with God,**  
**our spiritual affections that motivate our deeds & behavior.**

As Jesus explains, vs. 11, 18-20

... it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. ... what comes out of the mouth **proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.** For out of the heart come evil intentions ... These are what defiles a person.

It is our internal, our spiritual affections of the heart,  
from which our outward behavior, good or evil, **will flow...**

... which means that our problem with sin

is more than just a matter of external rules and behavior,  
and our problem is more than just the wrong that we do and say.

Instead and rather, our sinful misdeeds and our misspoken words  
are merely the symptoms, the fruits and affects  
of our fallen sinful nature, the disease deep within us  
that disrupts our relationship with God and other people.

Now it would be easy to condemn the Pharisees,  
as hopeless legalists who completely missed the point  
by ignoring or minimizing the heart & spiritual affections...  
**... but it's a bit more complicated, personal and difficult than that.**

We all, every one of us has struggles in this area of our faith.  
We often **excuse ourselves** ignoring our attitude & motivation  
in favor of relying on our outward expressions of religion...

... telling ourselves that maybe by trying to serve and do good deeds,  
then surely God will overlook and ignore  
the cool bitterness and resentment residing in my heart.

But God is not deceived or impressed by false religious ritual,  
not by our wonderful good works if **performed as a pious façade.**  
We may fool ourselves, and we may fool one another,  
but God's understanding runs much deeper and true.

As we read in 1 Samuel 16:7,

... I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward  
appearance, **but the Lord looks on the heart.**

**So where is the hope and where is the grace in that?**

Centuries ago, Augustine wrote about **training the affections of the heart,**  
by growing deeper, more real in our Christian life and walk with God  
by allowing the Holy Spirit to heal and transform us from within,  
declaring, **"It is in loving me that God has made me loveable."**

Outward behavior reflects the contents of our heart, our interior,  
**and yet a change of heart can redirect our outward deeds.**

Righteous is the gift of grace and mercy only through Jesus Christ,  
that leads to our faith and to an authentic-relationship with God,  
**which leads to transforming us and our lives from within.**

**As our affections,**  
**that is, that which we love and value most shift toward God,**  
**our outward behavior and attitudes will also move toward God.**

Faith then, is letting Christ in to reign and transform our hearts,  
and not just our outward religious appearances and good deeds.

**God desires to rule our affections for then the outward will follow.**

The Pharisees

approached the Scriptures as a book of Law, an operator's manual,  
a legalistic approach trying to earn and deserve God's favor  
through their strict adherence to Law, ritual and tradition.

If we approach God according to the flesh, with works of the flesh  
if we attempt by our own will-power & efforts to change ourselves,  
then, we will fail - we will not be able to change things,  
because we cannot do it by our own human will and effort.

Nothing but the gracious love, power and mercy of God  
can or will possibly soften human hearts hardened by sin.

We'll never accomplish a righteous life, only God can **by grace.**

God defeats evil with grace, through the love of Jesus Christ,  
because our God loves imperfect people and sinful people,  
and that in Jesus Christ, grace and mercy abound...  
... even when we haven't asked for it or deserve it.

Legalistic ways of trying to placate an angry and disappointed God,  
**were replaced** by God reaching down to unworthy sinners  
with the sacrificial and gracious love of Jesus Christ.

God chooses and loves us all, everyone is loved with no exceptions,  
despite the chaos we make of our lives, freely giving us  
what we cannot hope to achieve for ourselves, **by grace.**

Jesus calls us to receive his grace, healing and compassion,  
which has nothing to do with  
our being qualified or worthy of God's favor.

The Gospel of grace declares that we are loved for one reason only,  
and that is because God loves us ... .. period.

Jesus loves us in a way that defies human comprehension,  
and that is far beyond human conditions or limitations.

In truth, we are loved and valued, we are precious and treasured,  
simply because God has said so, and by God's choice alone...

**... and so we are called to do the same...**

**... for Jesus says that's the way it works in the Kingdom of God.**

**That is our hope for God's peace, joy, justice and acceptance,**  
that because our Lord who loves us with infinite grace,  
we are promised that God will never give up on any of us,

and however much any one of us may stray, sin or get it all wrong,  
yet we remain, always, well within the circling boundary  
of God's gracious care, mercy, healing & redeeming love.

The lesson is not strive to try harder and accomplish more,  
but to connect more, be more extravagant in showing God's love,  
**and recognize the truth,**  
**that even our best efforts will still fall woefully short.**

At best, even on our most faithful and obedient-to-God-day,  
our hope is to listen and cooperate with the Holy Spirit,  
so to participate in what God is already accomplishing.

As we read earlier, Psalm 36:5 & 7

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. How precious is  
your steadfast love, O God! **All people** may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

**\*\* I want to be very clear,**  
**that this is not a message that we're not trying hard enough,**  
**but am I making room for God's grace to grow and transform my life?**

**And is the Good News of Jesus Christ, God's grace**  
**the message that my life proclaims to the world?**

In Ephesians 3 Paul writes this, (Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to him who by **the power at work within us** is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all  
we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.  
Amen.